Audit as political struggle:
the doxa of managerialism clashing with the uncertainty of real life

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Introduction

The ubiquity of audit as a new form of accountability has spread across the globe (Power, 1999 and 2003; Swift , 2001; Strathern, 2000; Shore, 2008). Given its importance as a way of both assessing and shaping organisations for assessment, and the amount of resources consumed by organisations in feeding its demands, the everyday practices and impact of audit from the perspective of those audited deserve greater scrutiny. This article is about contesting auditing processes from the perspective of non-accountancy professionals involved in managing international non-government organisations (INGOs). We will narrate a specific ethnographic example of engaging with auditors and the audit process and discuss how a judgement emerged through practical, political and social processes and the mediation of sometimes highly conflictual power relationships. To make sense of our experience we draw on the thinking of Bourdieu, exploring different forms of social capital and arguing that audit is an ideological struggle over forms of management and control (1984, 1991, 1992, 2005). Our way of understanding the crisis that emerged is that those involved (including one of the authors of this article) had to find ways of managing in uncertainty within the group mediating the audit in order to agree how to manage uncertainty for the whole organisation.

Through participant-observation, underpinned by the methodological and theoretical approach of ethnography, as explained by Nader (2011) and Venkatesan and Yarrow (2012:14), we reflect on our experiences but also focus in particular on one specific case study. We outline how some managers and staff in a particular INGO considered their audit unnecessarily restrictive, given their more than 20 year experience of working in remote and difficult countries funded by donors with shifting priorities. At the same time a small faction of board members from the same INGO thought of the audit as an inflection point to bring in a different management regime which more accurately reflected more orthodox ways of understanding the role of management, sometimes referred to as managerialism (Kilkauer, 2015). The degree to which the auditors could be recruited to one position or another had consequences for power struggles within the organization, and lends credence to the idea that auditors can sometimes become the scapegoats of wider organizational struggles (Guénin-Paracini and Gendron, 2010).

This article begins with a brief overview of how we developed our perspective – both as trustees, managers and consultants in INGOs who have been audited and as social scientists who undertake research with organisations (mostly INGOs and public sector). We describe and reflect on a specific case study about an INGO being audited. We then investigate what claims are made about the purpose of audit, particularly for INGOs, and the ways in which the audit function has taken root and spread (both in terms of scope and focus) its specific and universalizing methods. To illuminate these struggles we draw on the ideas of Bourdieu because of his political understanding of the production and the reproduction of the social. Given the political nature of audit processes, it is political as well as technical skills that are required to deal with auditors' demands. It is our hope that practitioners may find these reflections on our experience of being audited useful for navigating audits themselves. Finally we point to areas for further research for thinking about managing uncertainty particularly in an organsational domain which works internationally and espouses explicitly moral ends.

Reflexive ethnographers of audit

Methodologically we draw on our own experience as researchers with theoretical interests in organisations and the international development sector, but also as trustees, managers and consultants in INGOs who have had to grapple with the ethics of commissioning audits and the institutional and political effects of being audited. In part this entailed participant-observation

in the tradition of ethnography as an approach to research that has emerged out of the discipline of social anthropology but has also been used by other social scientists (Crewe 2018). In the case of this article, as non-accountants being audited, it was the social world created with auditors during the rituals of audit that we experienced and subsequently reflected on.

Our process of doing 'fieldwork', as anthropologists call it, was similar in some ways to a conventional ethnographic project. Fieldwork does not require particular research techniques for anthropologists but is rather a social and political *process*, that is, prolonged engagement with a specific group of people to find out how they act, think, talk and relate with and to each other, and then writing about them. It is both social and political in the sense that understanding your relationships with informants, and how the inquiry inevitability involves power struggles, is an intrinsic part of the task of finding out what has or is happening between people (Eriksen 1995: 48-51, Lewis and Mosse 2006, Spencer 2007: 181-185). While some non-anthropologists conceive of ethnography as merely a collection of techniques or a methodology for doing research (e.g., stressing observation and interpretation Geddes and Rhodes 2018), within the discipline of anthropology it is almost universally accepted to be a social process of collaborative learning or education (Ingold 2017). Reflexively interrogating one's own part in this engagement, and why the researcher's attention is drawn to particular puzzles or influencing the research in other ways, is part of the ethnographer's way of working towards rigour. In our explanation of our experiences of auditing, we assume, like Ingold (2018), that the art of description entails picking out the features and critical moments of a narrative account that are most salient, influential and illuminating. This article is reflexive ethnography, rather than auto-ethnographical, because the central inquiry is about audit and a wide range of stakeholders involved, not primarily concerned with understanding ourselves, the authors.[1]

As is usually the case with participant-observation,[2] we have also relied heavily on our memories and interrogating experiences retrospectively which poses ethical challenges requiring careful treatment. In this case this process has benefitted from co-authorship: we have been holding each other to account as we inquire into our research and experience and

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[1] These distinctions, and the entanglement of method and theory, are continual themes in the journals of Hau: The Journal of Ethnography Theory and the Journal of Organizational Ethnography.

[2] Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice, Association of Social Anthropologist UK, https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf, accessed 22 March 2019.

protecting the anonymity of the different groups we have worked with as trustees, managers and consultants. Between the two of us we have worked with a huge range of INGOs between 1987 and the present, which we will not name on the grounds that many informants were not aware of our research. We have not sought retrospective consent because we consider the process of anonymising people's identity to be ethically more important and seeking consent would reveal the identity of some protagonists to those we approach. We consider it to be in the best interests of the staff of both the INGOs and the auditors to keep that out of even the semi-public domain (i.e., their organisations).

The detailed events we describe in this article arose in the main in a particular INGO in which we were both involved at different times, one as a consultant and the other as a board member between 2014-2018. All of the data we draw on derives from an informal process of participant-observation, learning and reflection rather than as part of formal funded research. Any reported speech or dialogue was recorded at the time either in emails to colleagues, research logs or diaries, especially during the time of the audit on which our ethnographic findings are based. To protect the identity of all protagonists we have removed all identifying information, even at times disguising ourselves, and omitted details about the organisations, including their size, history and the nature of their work, and even the roles we played within the organisations. While this inhibits the possibility of critically scrutinizing our own roles, protecting the anonymity of those involved is ethically more important in this case. Since method and theory are entangled in any ethnography, we will reveal more about how we discovered and made sense of auditing as we narrate our experience.

Assumptions about audit

But before we explain and analyse our experiences, we should explain our assumptions about audit and what it means for INGOs. Auditing within INGOs shares much in common with other sectors, but also has its own specific circumstances. A consensus between NGO managers and auditors about the purpose of audit appears to rest on certain claims: auditing of INGOs is in part an attempt to check their financial health, and reassure potential supporters that their investment will be relatively safe, but increasingly to reduce uncertainty and risk at the same time. As managers with experience of being audited we acknowledge that INGOs also have to respond to questions of legitimacy. But as critical management scholars, we argue that audit

has increasingly become a way of exercising technocratic and socio-ideological means of control, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2004) refer to it. Where did we get these ideas from? We have observed over decades of working as managers in INGOs that it is often not only through the audits themselves, but advice and 'training' that auditing expertise and managerialist assumptions are universalized, proselytized, and defended. From our post-structuralist social science perspective on aid – as entailing complex unpredictable socio-political processes within which relationships are often conflictual – we often found this training highly contentious. It is often not possible in aid work, as in other human service oriented organization, to summarily drop one 'product line', a local partner organization, in favour of another, or to change dramatically a course of action which depends on longer term relationships.

To give an example, one of us recently attended a seminar (as a consultant to an INGO board) led by one of the principal auditing firms. The training was set up for the trustees of this INGO to help them manage 'strategically in times of rapid change', that is to say in conditions of high uncertainty. Producing a variety of two by two grids and frameworks favoured in management textbooks, the auditor encouraged the trustees to ensure that they drove their organisation from 'threshold performance to leading edge'. They were told that the trustees needed to make sure that every aspect of what they were doing was 'best in class' and he promised to show them what to concentrate on to make it so: aptitude, core competences, values and skills base. The first thing to focus on, as far as this group of auditors was concerned, would be a 'skills audit' of the board itself. And although these were trustees who were responsible for a charitable organisation, the terms 'business', 'business strategy' and 'business model' were liberally sprinkled throughout the presentation, implying that rules devised for business could be easily generalized to charities. It was a given that everyone in the room was responsible for a business, that there was a 'class' that they could be best in, and that they could measure and improve performance towards identified business ends.

Next came a slide which related to the management of risk. This particular example seemed to have an enormous number of squares hatched in distressing shades of red, which was used to denote an area of high risk for INGOs. A good proportion related to financial management, which in many organisations has become a dominating preoccupation. Ironically, the very market place for aid, which has been created by donors including central government, where funds are awarded on the basis of a competitive bidding process, has contributed to financial

uncertainty in the sector. Many organisations are heavily dependent upon project-by-project funding, putting them in a permanent state of uncertainty as they operate hand to mouth from year to year. It is this very financial uncertainty which is sometimes remarked upon negatively by financial auditors when they come to assess the INGOs accounts. Rather than assessing INGOs against their own standards, they are guided instead by a taken-for-granted discourse about certainty, predictability, control and financial stability. It was hard to be part of this training exercise and not be alarmed by the anticipation of what might happen to the organization, particularly in the light of UK law placing personal financial liability on the trustees of charitable organisations, should failure occur. The strong anxiety narrative promoted by the auditor was infectious and hard to resist.

Our wariness about being audited partly derives from an awareness that the regime of audit and scrutiny is similar in the INGO sector to the corporate sector even though the 'business' of INGOs is very different. NPM (New Public Management) has permeated INGOs (Gulrajani, 2011; Mowles, 2013), and additionally there has been an influx of managers from the private sector, with the assumptions that managing a not-for-profit demands the same kind of discipline and managerial practice as managing a for-profit organization. One key aspect of the influence of managerialism is the financialisation of INGOs, along with much of the public sector in the UK, where 'performance' is measured by a reduced number of metrics, often of a financial kind, and the institutionalization of an internal meta-control, as described by Parker (2002). There is also a presumption of predictability and control – this is an assumption shared by donors, who demand predictions of numerical outcomes of social development interventions up to five years into the future with an explicit, and a logical, 'theory of change', demonstrating how particular courses of action will lead to the anticipated results. Many of the managerial tools adopted for planning and measuring the success of social development initiatives were originally developed in project management disciplines of bridge building in a military context (Gasper, 2000; Mowles, 2010). Furthermore, the collapse of various high profile charities (most noisily Kids Company in 2016 in the UK) has created a climate within the auditing culture of more intensive scrutiny and, we would argue, interference as well as an inflation of the severity of risks.

The rationalities and struggles created by auditing

Auditors need to carry out investigations to find anomalies on the one hand, but depend on developing relationships with the audited on the other. The public and formal claim of auditors is that objective knowledge about the 'health' and efficiency of organisations can be produced by a form of investigation, whether an audit of their finances or due diligence about their capacity. The detective work is mostly about scrutinizing a sample of texts, but supplemented by interviews with key protagonists to test their knowledge, honesty and reliability. Within the world of INGOs, these investigations have increased in scale exponentially between the 1990s and the 2010s and have relied more and more heavily on documentary proof of compliance with regulation. However, it is often the mere existence of policies and statements that is seen as proof, rather than evidence of implementation and what goes on in practice. To give an example of the scale and type of documentary evidence required from INGOs, when the UK government awarded grants to UK-based INGOs in 2011 they employed an auditing firm to undertake due diligence to ensure that the organisations had the capacity to manage grants, as experienced by one of us as a senior manager (Crewe 2014). Their assessment of the organisations' governance, financial health and capacity, technical skills in the programme area, systems, and processes, was based on the assumption that compliance with policies, laws, and regulations leads to good work. They had two main standardized methods and both were applied irrespective of the size of the charity: (1) they required each agency to submit 53 bundles of documents – either policies or documentary "evidence" – ranging from HR policies (as just one bundle) to a finance manual, evaluation procedures, CVs for trustees and staff, in the case of one organization amounting to thousands of pages. And (2) through interviews spread over two days during which the auditors filled out a 54-page standardised questionnaire. The interview involved little discussion, and any specific circumstances that affected this particular organization were considered an inconvenience to collecting the paperwork. The staff assumption that the most important criteria for success of this grant – the ability to work well with partner organisations in other countries – did not even arise.

This example only created labour for the UK INGO itself. However, a similar approach is applied to aid receiving NGOs throughout the global south with far more dire consequences given the resource shortages they face (Crewe 2014). For decades scholars of international development have been offer critiques and alternatives to the way that aid has become industrialised, measured and audited (Crewe and Axelby 2013, Olivier de Sardan 2005, Gardner

and Lewis 2015: 36). It has been argued that audits in the global south not only waste people's time but distort the outcomes for intended beneficiaries by diverting people's attention to working on the appearance of financial health and predictable results, rather than engaging in the unpredictability of participatory processes. But this article is not so much about the impact of audit in the global south, about which much has been written, but about audit processes within a UK based INGO.

To navigate audits, you have to know as much as possible about the political mini-world you are in and the 'game' you are playing (Bourdieu 1992, 2005). The process of audit and due diligence depends upon verification of organizational bona fides through documentation, on the assumption that documents give material 'evidence' that a particular standard is being adhered to, but the pattern is a common one. The auditors investigated organisational capacity in their limited way, but seemed scarcely concerned in both cases about the quality of relationships, or working processes, and far more interested in documents that either contained bureaucratic rules or proof of probity. Furthermore, although ostensibly value-neutral, our experience of audit has been that it is nonetheless malleable to suit particular power-laden negotiations, as we explore again below. It was with this critical view of auditing that one of the authors entered into the specific conflictual audit that we relate as an ethnographic case that is indicative of a wider pattern.

Our way of understanding an effective audit process is as a negotiated and socio-political activity that involves a degree of conflict and compromise in the successful mediation of risk and uncertainty. The legitimacy of audit has to be performed by particular players in a given context, as Power (2003) has pointed out, drawing on many other studies. On the one hand, auditors need to build relationships in order to get access to the information they need, and on the other and in doing so they may compromise their ability to be independent and find anomalies (Guenin-Paracini et al., 2015). In this article we draw attention to power struggles within a particular INGO which were exacerbated by the intervention of auditors, and which were only resolved by political alliance building and negotiation in order to achieve a successful audit. When audit is seen as an emergent, negotiated and political activity, it also becomes clear that it is an exercise of practical judgment (practical logic and a 'feel for the game' in the *habitus*, as Bourdieu terms it,1992: 66 and 102) on all sides, which leaves open the idea of uncertainty without collapsing into a set of risks that can be mitigated.

We argue that this negotiated and socio-political process is a struggle over what O'Malley describes as 'aggregating and individuating technologies of governing in the present in terms of an indeterminate future' (2006: 18). In other words, at the heart of the inquiry is the extent to which particular organisations can resist a specific kind of standardising expertise (Barrett et al. 2005), through interactions between people face-to-face in a conflict over different accounts of what is preeminent (MacInerney, 2008). It is also a struggle over what matters: for the auditor it might be generalized, verifiable and perhaps countable forms of knowledge in the shape of documents and spreadsheets and the presentation of management standards which conform to contemporary orthodoxies, while staff in an INGO may pay greater attention to the relationships which enable the work to be done, given that both the process and outcome involve people and their needs or constraints.

In the INGO context there are competing ideas about what it means to do good. INGOs are obliged increasingly to operate in a competitive market place for donations, and auditing companies play an increasingly significant role in framing the discourse about what INGOs should be doing and the way they should be doing it. Equally, the auditing literature points to the way in which auditing firms have themselves been subject to financial pressure which creates ambivalence for practitioners torn between commercial success and public service (McNair, 1991). So, rather than merely scrutinizing and inspecting INGOs to evaluate their managerial and legal performance on behalf of donors and the wider public, auditors may play a role in actively shaping them towards particular marketised ends (or at least in attempting to do so) driven in part by their own business logics. In our view these ends are increasingly managerial, privilege financial outcomes, are overly concerned in particular with financial stability or growth and are predicated on economic measures of efficiency, effectiveness and in general an aversion to financial risk.

An ethnography of a specific audit: negotiating uncertainty

We now turn to the ethnographic example of an INGO being audited at the same time as a long-standing conflict on the board was gathering pace. GlobalAid is a large INGO founded many decades ago with its headquarters based in the UK and with offices in Africa, Asia and Central America. For some years half the board (including the Chair and Treasurer, one an accountant and the other a finance specialist) formed a faction which worried deeply about financial

viability and pressurised staff to invest more money in accounting, wanting at the same time to introduce more managerial controls: KPIs and metrics which would tie the organization to explicit, pre-reflected standards, thus provoking gaming strategies in staff but making the trustees feel more in control. The other half of the board sided with the CEO and most of the staff sharing their view that the risks were long-standing and could be managed by designing the work with financial flexibility. They were content not to introduce too many metrics for managing. Staff tended to assume that relationships of political solidarity and trust were more important than having tight accounting procedures. This did not mean that they argued against rigorous financial accountability. But the INGO had deliberately chosen to work in neglected and unstable countries as an expression of solidarity with the people there, so staff and managers had become used to trying to preserve what they considered unique about the organisation and the way it worked. This preference for solidarity with overseas partners based on improvisational budgeting and constant adaptation to their needs became, in the eyes of some of the board members, an excuse for not applying more formal and orthodox management and budgeting techniques, which would make staff more accountable to them. It was around this issue which the pre-existing conflict turned, responsivesness vs control in the face of uncertainty, and which drew their audit firm into a struggle. The appointment of new trustees reconfigured these factions with the managerially concerned group being suddenly outnumbered by the pro-staff group on the board.

The Chair and Treasurer had been sharing their reservations about GlobalAid's financial practice, and their desire for more managerial approaches with the auditors, in part based on what they heard from two staff members in private conversations. So, the first pass of the audit gave the organization a financial clean bill of health but recounted a long list of criticisms of management and accounting practice. They wanted more documentation and a statement that the organisation was a 'Going Concern' (the accounting term which testifies that an organisation is unlikely to be liquidated during a minimum of the next twelve months) to be written by the board in the annual report. The trustees wrote this but the auditors were still not satisfied. They finally asked the trustees to make a disclosure (specifically a statement that expressed doubt about whether the charity was financial viable for the foreseeable future). To make such a statement in the accounts could potentially jeopardise fundraising prospects as donors who would be unlikely to fund an organisation that could be financially unviable. It could threaten the organisation's survival. But if the board refused to write a negative disclosure, the auditors threatened that they would have to 'qualify' the accounts, expressing

doubt or disagreement with the charity's management in audited accounts that would have had even more damaging consequences for fundraising.

In the furore which followed, both the Chair and the Treasurer resigned, under pressure from the other trustees, as did the Finance Director, which gave further scope for an alliance between the remaining trustees and staff to negotiate a different outcome. Despite the absence of Treasurer and Finance Director, GlobalAid's remaining board and staff forensically analysed why and how the crisis had emerged. The trustees asked questions of staff about every detail to reassure themselves they understood the finances; through endless discussion they investigated the detail, and the relationship between various financial calculations, rather than relying on the documents alone. Staff and trustees all agreed that the organization was severely damaged by a history of internal conflict on the board. But since it would have been too delicate for the auditors to blame the trustees (their direct employers), they focused on a silo culture within the staff team as the source of conflict, while GlobalAid's trustees and managers perceived the long-standing antagonism as emanating from their own board downwards. Even the auditors had become entangled in the factionalism that had emerged in the board so the disagreement with the auditors was far from a simple case of us versus them.

While the auditors wanted documentary proof of financial viability – in the form of bank reconciliations, five year global cashflow forecasts and detailed plans for handling risks in at least three different projected financial scenarios – GlobalAid staff and board were now wedded to its existing approach. They relied on frequent forecasting for consequences of different scenarios for the head office, because the organisation's survival depended on it, while keeping flexibility across their many offices globally (so that any office could be closed without incurring costs from the unrestricted reserves, for example), and investing time in fundraising rather than detailed global reconciliations. The auditors clearly did not think that GlobalAid management understood accounting or risk management; the board and staff of GlobalAid were convinced, on the other hand, that the auditors failed to appreciate how programmes and institutional funding from grant-makers works in the world of international development. It requires management through, and therefore relationships of, trust and negotiation. However, GlobalAid's insistence that its risks were manageable was somewhat weakened by a history of late filing of its accounts to Companies House and the Charity Commission as well as its lack of financial specialists at this critical moment of negotiations. The wrangling continued for months, mostly on the phone and through exchanges of documents by email.

After three more months of the staff responding to the auditors' requests for information, three of the trustees met the two representatives of the auditing firm face-to-face. The meeting began in an atmosphere of social awkwardness. The auditor responsible for the audit was known to the trustees, but a more senior one – brought in to help to resolve the situation – was a stranger. This senior auditor and the trustee leading this meeting, Max, clearly realised that it was important not to rush into talking business; they needed to make some connection so that they could discern whether trust could be established. They began by talking about people and places they knew in common, establishing that they had a mutual friend of a friend, which relaxed the mood of those present. The senior auditor went on to sooth everyone further with statements about his breadth of knowledge of the sector, finance and fundraising. The lead trustee, Max, countered with a similar claim about expertise and then outlined his assessment of GlobalAid, mentioning the CEO's talent for flexible management, and presented a new positive statement in place of the disclosure which would have expressed reservations about GlobalAid being a Going Concern. They made suggestions and the more senior partner even added a few more positive points and deleted a defensive sentence or two.

After the meeting the more junior auditor who was responsible for the audit still had reservations but her refusal to accept the positive statement would have meant qualifying the accounts. In her final conversation with Max she tried one more time to get the Board to express reservations about longer-term financial health: "Do you realise it is in your interests as a Trustee to write a disclosure which expresses doubt about Going Concern in this climate?" Max still refused on behalf of the Board. After years of working with the organisation, the auditor was reluctant to qualify their accounts and jeopardise their survival, so she finally signed off the accounts. The following year the organization employed a new Finance Director, changed auditors and had a clean and relatively smooth audit with no questions about 'Going Concern' or donor compliance, even though the projections into the future looked virtually identical, and the year after that they gained a huge surplus and many of the earlier perceived 'issues' had been resolved. At the time of writing, several years later, the financial management of the organisation was far more efficient after a period of focusing on improving relationships within GlobalAid. Their financial sustainability is far less certain, however, as various donors are cutting back their investments into UK-based INGOs. When one of the authors asked the new auditors why the process of audit had been so smooth for the last three years, they replied that

it was because the accounts had been well-prepared and the Finance Director really understood what the auditors needed. After all, in his past job he was an auditor himself.

Discussion: conflict and compromise

We have used episodes from our experience of audit and related processes in the domain of international development to reflect upon the clash between two different ideologies of management, which the audit process brought out into the open, either because of an implicit orientation towards managerialism in the auditors, or because of implicit organizational tensions. This is a dynamic which occurs over and over again in organizational life, whatever the sector. Bourdieu writes about it thus: 'The field of forces (in the firm) is also a field of struggles, a socially constructed field of action in which the agents equipped with different resources confront each other in order to access to exchange, and to preserve or transform the currently prevailing relation of force' (2005: 199, parenthesis ours). These struggles arose in our examples despite the public and formal representation of auditing as a rational, legal and bureaucratic process that attempts to bring about greater standardization. For Bourdieu, struggles over the dominance of ideas are no less present in the scientific domain, or any discipline which aspires to scientific credibility. In *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (2004) he argues that the discipline of science also involves conflicts and competing interests, but ones which take place according to particular rules and governed by particular values, for example disinterestedness and objectivity, which in the scientific domain have particular capital.

In an earlier section we saw that a typical training course for trustees illustrated the ways in which particular ideologies are conveyed and replicated, where ideological assumptions about the world are conveyed as 'best practice'. Bourdieu describes this naturalization process in *Language and Symbolic Power*. Dominant individuals:

> …endeavor to impose universally, through a discourse permeated by the simplicity and transparency of common sense, the feeling of obviousness and necessity which this world imposes on them; having an interest in leaving things as they are, they attempt to undermine politics in a depoliticized political discourse, produced through a process of neutralization, or even better, of negation… (1991: 131).

Auditors tend to portray their work – undertaking audits or due diligence – as above politics. When audit firms offer guidance and training on the very practices which then they come to audit, which carries the authority of an examiner who tells you how they are going to set and mark your examination and the kinds of answers which will get good grades, they do not see this as political. As a participant in this particular training one of the authors experienced the anxiety bodily, provoked by the auditor's encouragement not to fall behind, not to lose control of the finances, not to fail in a competitive market place for aid. This is a good example of the way in which power works in granular ways, making us subject to particular ways of thinking and acting and recognizing each other in the process. In order to be 'good' trustees we were invited to take up particular ways of thinking and acting, so that we would discipline one another and ourselves.

In our ethnographic case study the relationship between GlobalAid and its auditors was inherently political but this had to be disguised to avoid a breakdown in the co-operation between them. This was partly to cover over a cleavage in the board between those who wanted to impose greater board control in the form targets and KPIs, who had an interest in a critical audit, and those trying to preserve the adapative status quo. But, with less political and social capital, staff could not simply argue their point of view, based on their experience of fundraising or bookkeeping, they had to keep generating new documents with apparently new information. It was as if the audit process became an endless process of appeal and re-trial. Thus, the documents became critical to the processes of political relating in that they mediated this struggle through numbers, projections and risk assessments (Riles et al., 2006). Contributing to the final breakthrough was the making of an alliance between a leading trustee and the senior auditor, which Bourdieu might understand as the establishment of a relationship of cultural capital (1984). Both trustee and senior auditor could recognise each other as players of equal social status, thus engendering trust. This process of presenting new information was partly a strategy within a political game of trying to develop alternative truths, but also a way of establishing credibility and plausibility to the auditors, which succeeded with the establishment of social bonds in common.

The timing of GlobalAid's audit created unusual uncertainty about what would happen in the organisation, which is why to understand the process of auditing within an historical and political perspective is essential. It took place shortly after the collapse of Merlin and Kids

Company, two charities in the UK that got into financial difficulties where the auditors were criticized for failing to issue sufficient warnings. So some aspects of the narrative are specific to this particular audit, some are generalizable across the ritualized process of all audits. It is ritualized in the sense that it depends on highly regulated interaction, both formal and informal, a clear hierarchy of power relationships and the communication of moral positions (e.g., about 'good' and 'bad' management). One way of understanding this is as the competing of various forms of capital, après Bourdieu. Since contesting the expertise of the auditors in this constrained situation was difficult, and given that the INGO recognized it was in a political game, trustees and staff gave up trying to persuade the auditors of their alternative view and employed a different strategy, which involved alliance building and the establishment of social recognition. At the same time, the junior partner's long-standing work with GlobalAid represented an emotional investment in the organization which meant that in the final moment perhaps she could not face jeopardizing their future. Either way the crisis was averted by political compromise and negotiation rather than merely a reliance on financial and managerial facts.

There is a great deal of literature in organisational studies exploring what might be meant by skilful action in such circumstances, but as we mentioned above, Bourdieu understands this responsiveness as 'a feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1992). Rather than being a conscious, rational and strategic skill, for Bourdieu it involves a preflected, immanent and intuitive response to the political demands of the particular power configuration one finds oneself in with others. A parallel concept in organisational scholarship is Aristotle's idea of *phronesis*, the practical wisdom born of experience which brings together politics and negotiation of the good while undertaking purposive action.

Political skill in navigating technologies of risk

We have aimed to describe some episodes of interaction between auditors and INGOs to investigate how general and particular forms of expertise conflict, particularly over what it means to manage in uncertainty and to conform or otherwise to taken-for-granted assumptions about management. To do so we have drawn on Bourdieu's understanding of the inherently political nature of the *habitus*, where ideology is contested through a variety of forms of capital:

political, cultural and scientific. In our experience of a contested audit in the INGOs in which one of us worked, we experienced how the audit process could both amplify existing conflicts, or try to impose a particular managerial orthodoxy as a taken for granted *doxa* (in Bourdieu's terms). This was accompanied by a different understanding on the part of the auditors and their allies in the organisation of how to respond to a future which is radically unpredictable, particularly in an aid context.

To reflect further on the standardizing ideology of audit in an international development context, the INGOs in these examples are working in countries that endure conflict, unpredictable political regimes, uncertain electricity and water supplies and usually debilitating poverty. Most of the work is implemented through local partner organisations or offices, adapting and surviving in these conditions. The relationships between headquarters in the UK and partners or offices overseas are built up over time and require patience and consideration. Bearing in mind that international development has been transformed into an industry over the last thirty years, there could be no work without tight cooperation, planning, professional bureaucratic systems, and formal financial control, so to critique the regimes of audit is not to argue that anything goes in terms of the way one runs an INGO including financially. However, and at the same time, the ability to work in the domain of international development involves high levels of skillful improvisation, adaptability and changing of minds based on trust forged in the relationships with people in distant offices/organisations, because the circumstances in which the work is undertaken change often and abruptly.

So one prominent aspect of the struggle over expertise is the degree to which the general activity of international development is governable by national or international benchmarks of managerial 'performance', technical assessments of contracts, or qualified assessments of risks, i.e. known unknowns, rather than uncertainty, that is to say, unknown unknowns. To what degree does calculation, control, contract and predictability square with the reality of unpredictability and uncertainty navigated through relationships based on trust? How much does audit stray over into auditors recommending an idealized form of managing more appropriate to the private sector, and perhaps in the view of some critics, not even applicable there. And, as we mentioned above, the funding of international development has itself become marketised and based on increasingly huge bids to institutional donors competing against more and more rivals, and thus also highly uncertain. International development is a field of work that is unusually uncertain at home and abroad. We would argue that the specific challenges of

the international development sector require specific attitudes to risk but audit practices often pull INGOs towards standardising. Technologies of risk have replaced expert judgement and have expanded into areas of social life previously unencumbered by calculations of risk. The net effect is to cramp the judgement of experts and to standardize calculations of risk according to universal metrics or 'benchmarks', with audit being a good example of this. O'Malley encourages a much more nuanced understanding of the interplay of the totalizing tendencies of risk disciplines that at the same time call out resistance and political struggles which create new possibilities (2006). Our case study illustrates the need to develop political skill to deal with audits rather than to accumulate knowledge in the technologies of risk.

This article has drawn on examples of the practice of auditing undertaken in the domain of international development to test the pervasive assumption that it is principally a rational, legal and bureaucratic process. We hope that this critical view of auditing may also be helpful for organisations on the receiving end of what has become a ubiquitous rite of passage, particularly in the INGO sector where access to funds is increasingly predicated on due diligence exercises based on the assessment of documentation and administrative procedures, and may also stray over into offering technical assistance about how best to manage based on contestable assumptions. From the perspective of non-accountants, we take for granted in general that auditing processes are helpful in encouraging trustees and managers in INGOs to question their assumptions about what they are doing and justify the decisions they have made. However, auditors usually do so with particular ideological intent, sometimes reflecting dominant assumptions about what is and what is not 'good management'. It would be simplisitic to imply that this provokes a split between INGOs and auditors, because in our experience many INGOs are themselves split internally between those who support the turn to managerialism, and those less enamoured with it. Equally, not all auditors are footsoldiers complicit in the onward march of New Public Management. We hope in our turn to pose questions for auditors about the methods they use and their conceptual underpinnings. Is audit as value-free, independent and objective as is sometimes publically claimed by the auditors themselves, or is it, as we hope partially to have demonstrated, a particular social practice mediated and functionalized in particular circumstances with particular others that can only be understood with a sense of the socio-politics involved? We are asking auditors to leave more time and space for discussion and negotiation during audit processes and we are making suggestions about how those being audited might navigate that space for the benefit of their organisations.

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