

The Role of Media

Why should we use the media in our campaigns? Perhaps this is a strange way to begin this section of the Handbook, but it is an important question for groups to ask themselves before beginning a relationship with mainstream or alternative media outlets. The media is pervasive in modern life, especially in the western world, where images and sounds – TV, radio, the web, billboards – bombard us everywhere we go.

But attempting to use the media for our campaign work is like picking up a double-edged sword: the media can both support and destroy good campaigns. It should be approached with caution and also with a good understanding of what you want out of the relationship. This section can help you identify what you want from the media and why and suggests some strategies for success in getting your message out to as wide an audience as possible.

Group Aims

Think about what you want to get out of using the media. Discuss it in your group and be clear about your aims, which could be to:

- Gain new members/participants for action or event.
- Apply critical pressure on a specific issue through showing widespread opposition.
- Make more visible an issue or way of working that you criticise.
- Send messages to your opponents.



INDYMEDIA PRESS CENTRE IN GOTHENBURG, SWEDEN.

PHOTO: SIMO HELLSTEN

Messaging

Spend time as a group working out your ‘key messages’. Preferably, you will not have more than three for one action or campaign. Define them as carefully and concisely as possible. Write them down and make sure everyone in your group knows what they are and is happy or at least can live with them. Remember: these are your public messages, so write them in clear and easily digestible language that everyone (both in and outside of your group) can understand.

Think about how your target group(s) might receive these key messages. Can the messages be changed to be more attractive and still stay on focus? Defining and agreeing upon your messages is useful because it can enable and empower more people in your group to communicate with the media. It will make your communications more consistent, reinforce your position, and keep you focused. Make sure that all your communications with the media include one or more of these key messages. Role play encounters with journalists to practice your key messages and how to interact with the media in an effective way (see ‘Role Play’ Exercise, p134).

Types of Communication

There are many different ways of engaging with the media. Common for all the different ways presented below is the importance of thinking like a journalist. Ask yourself: What is newsworthy? What is interesting for others to read? What is the news? At the same time keep your focus on your key messages!

Note that media in different countries function differently. Find out how it works in your country and make appropriate changes. Ask a journalist or an activist with media experience in your country to give you hints about what to think about.

Press Releases

A good press release will get picked up. Try to piggy-back on bigger news stories if you can relate them to your campaign activity. For example, if a government or celebrity makes a statement about your general field, write a short press release the same day with your group’s response. You can also use this opportunity to flag an event or action you have planned or a particular campaign strand you have underway (example: a petition you are running). Write clearly and concisely, give your piece a snappy, topical, and clever headline, and know how to get it to journalists (maintain an email/fax/phone database). Always include the date and contact details for a spokesperson or media contact from your group. Target press releases to local and thematic press. For example: ‘Woman from Oxford arrested in nuclear weapons protest’ to an Oxford paper or ‘Swedish priest arrested in nuclear weapons protest’ to a Swedish Church/Christian paper. Your group’s media person should collect information for the targeted press releases from everyone in the action group: e.g., name (correct spelling), age, occupation, origin, quote about the action. If quotes, facts, and background are included in a press release, you have done much of the journalistic work and media can easily publish it.

Spokesperson/Designated Media Person

Make sure you always have an identifiable contact point for the media. Get that group member an email address and a mobile phone. Make sure she or he is always well-briefed and can watch the media for developments in your field so as to respond adequately to new information. If there is a risk of arrest, the media person should be non-arrestable in order to be accessible for the media while others are arrested. Ideally you should have more than one media person.

Meeting Journalists

Building good relationships with individual journalists is possible. Remember, if they are interested in your issue, you will probably get results if you help by supplying good quality, accurate information and doing them the odd favour, such as giving them key information that you have not given to other journalists. After all, most journalists love a scoop. However, be careful too: some journalists will misquote and misrepresent you (deliberately or otherwise). This is most likely with tabloid press and more right-wing press, but not exclusively.

Agencies

Make sure your press releases are sent to national and international press agencies. Sometimes stories not picked up by media outlets you have contacted directly are picked up later because the story appears on the wires. Call agencies and media after you have sent a press release. Ask if they have received the press release and if they will do a piece on it. Make sure they know who you are and how you can be contacted if they want more information later.

Letters Page

One good way to communicate your messages to the general public is to have one or two people in your group who buy the main newspapers every day and who then write letters about the content of the papers which relates to their field. You can get a lot of letters published this way, especially with local/regional media. Such visibility helps to make your campaign seem bigger, stronger, and more engaged than it may actually be. Don't always have the same people write the letters – after a while the editors will notice!

Website

Your Website is an important tool for communicating your messages; journalists will visit it for background. Make sure your site is always updated. Consider creating a separate section – a 'media centre' – for your press releases, with high quality images (which you own and do not mind others using or reprinting) and succinct background information. Obviously, it should also include direct contact details for your media person (phone, email). A blog (a website written by individual members or the group) is a new way to spread information about an action. Don't write things that you don't want to media to print, if you want to use the blog for the media or it is public.

Writing for/Engaging with Alternative Media

Alternative media in its many forms can be your friend in gaining support. But it is not generally read or viewed by a huge audience. And you will probably have to do a lot of the writing yourself! Sites in the global indymedia network can help you communicate about your campaign to a generally sympathetic audience, but this is unlikely to ‘apply critical pressure’ or ‘mainstream an unpopular issue/way of working’. It may however, gain you a few new activists and, in some cases send messages to your opponents (the police and some companies are monitoring bits of the alternative media around the clock). The alternative media can also provide a space for disparate campaigns to identify opportunities for working together and to explore ideas about what works and what doesn’t based on collective experience.

Planning a Media Campaign

So, we have some idea of the practical methods of communicating our messages, but to get the most out of your effort, invest some time planning a ‘media campaign’. This means figuring out how to communicate both effectively and strategically and with the consent of the rest of the group. Media campaigns are best suited for short-term projects or by breaking down your campaign into bite-sized pieces. To get the most from this process, you must integrate your media campaign into a complete campaign strategy and define your key messages clearly (see ‘Messaging’, p50).

For example, imagine a group which aims to expose and undermine a particular arms company. Say the group is planning to work for the next six months to get some of the company’s suppliers to stop working with them. The group may be considering writing to those suppliers, lobbying their workers, blockading their depots, and so on. A good media campaign should be able to sell the group’s activities as positive – and the company’s as negative. First, consider the obvious criticisms of your group’s strategy. For example: ‘the trade is legal’, ‘you are disrupting ordinary workers’, or ‘your tactics are threatening’. Before you ever send a single press release, work out responses to such criticisms. One way to do this is to prepare a basic ‘question and answer’ sheet for any group members who will be dealing with the media. This briefing sheet should include your key messages at the top.

If the campaign has key events over the six-month period, plot these out and work out what information you should send to the media and when. Consider sending advance notice of events a couple of weeks beforehand and more detailed/confirmed information three or four days before (or at a time that meets local media deadlines – for example, in Britain, most weekly newspapers go to press on Thursday, so send information on Tuesday night/Wednesday morning). Send information about what happened at the event on the day itself. Plot these releases out over the six months of the campaign. Likewise, if there are key government or industry events, reports being released, international bodies meeting, etc., plot these dates and work out how you can respond to them. Be prepared! Make sure you have a decent num-

ber of high-resolution images that sell your campaign. Take good photos at events and actions and make them available to journalists on request or for download from your Website.

Work out which media are likely to be sympathetic to the campaign and its tactics but also have a big and broad readership. Invest energy in cultivating your relationship with these. Regional media (press, radio, TV) are often keen for content and are more likely to publish/broadcast you. Make sure you include the local/regional media in any communications.

Summary of General Tips

Try to build good relationships with journalists; you can help each other. But remember: journalists can't always be trusted. Always release to agencies, as you never know where in the world something will be picked up. Always have a group member on hand to deal with media enquiries. Keep press releases short and simple. Be prepared for tough questions. Stay on message. Go for local angles. Ask other campaigners, share knowledge, read manuals, or attend free or low-cost training courses.



FOOD NOT BOMBS ACTION IN MOSCOW, RUSSIA.

PHOTO: ANDREAS SPECK