

Grassroots media relations

A short introduction

**Ulli Diemer
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This document is a resource written to accompany presentations on media relations for grassroots groups and activists. Ulli Diemer is available to speak to activist groups on using the media, framing issues, and communications strategy. See contact information below. This document is revised periodically; this version is dated April 23, 2010.

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What are the media?

Dictionary Definitions:

- 1) an agency or means of doing something, a means of communication
- 2) an intermediate layer
- 3) mass media (TV, radio, newspapers)

Keep in mind:

- Individually and collectively, we are all walking talking media who communicate with other people. Much good organizing is done simply by talking to other people: political work doesn't *necessarily* require using the mass media.
- We also have access to 'do-it-yourself media' which we can use without having to go through the gatekeepers of the mass media, such as: posters, leaflets, buttons, newsletters, videos (YouTube, etc.), podcasts, email, websites
- There are alternative media available which take a progressive approach to issues. They don't reach the numbers of people that the dominant media do, but they are valuable means for disseminating our messages.
- Your own initiatives may attract media attention, positive or negative, even if you aren't looking for it. The media are always looking for interesting stories, so they may find you even if you haven't approached them. This is especially true if you hold events (talks, protests) or post news and comment on your website or via your *SOURCES* media landing page.

Gatekeepers

What defines "**the media**" in the sense of the mass media (newspapers, TV, radio, etc.) is that we have to go through **intermediaries** or **gatekeepers**.

Someone else – an editor, a producer, a journalist – decides whether a story is '*newsworthy*'. **They decide** *whether* a story gets covered, they decide *how* it gets covered, and they decide whether your point of view is represented.

When you seek media coverage for your issue or event, you are trying to persuade or entice media gatekeepers to cover your story or point of view. And you're doing it in competition with countless other organizations, businesses, and individuals also looking for media attention.

Who are the media?

In Canada, there are more than 6,000 media outlets:

| | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| TV networks and channels (180) | TV stations (150) |
| Cable TV stations (300+) | Radio stations (700+) |
| News services including Canadian Press (CP) | Campus radio stations (70) |
| Daily newspapers (120) | Church papers |
| Weekly & community papers (1300+) | Consumer & trade magazines (2700+) |
| Campus papers (200+) | Ethnic papers (c. 600) |
| Labour papers | Newsletters |
| Online publications (e.g. Straight Goods, rabble) | |
| Parliamentary Press Galleries (in Ottawa and in each province) | |

Canada's media publish or broadcast in **more than 50 languages**.

American and other international media also reach Canadian audiences via broadcast or Internet. Placing a story in a foreign outlet can also be a way to reach a Canadian (or international) audience.

Some media are key **media drivers**. In Canada: these are CP (Canadian Press) and the *Globe & Mail*. These are the media other media turn to find important national stories. Getting a story carried by CP vastly increases its chances of being carried by newspapers and stations across the country.

Who are the people who work for the media?

There are thousands of professional (employed) journalists in Canada, and thousands of full-time or part-time freelancers. Many are members of one or more of:

| | |
|---|---|
| Canadian Association of Journalists | Professional Writers Association of Canada |
| Editors Association of Canada | Canadian Association of Broadcasters |
| Canadian Ethnic Media Association | Canadian Ethnic Press and Media Council |
| Canadian Authors Association | Radio-Television News Directors Association |
| Canadian Science Writers Associations | Native American Journalists Association |
| Canadian Church Press | Canadian Association of Labour Media |
| Canadian Association of Black Journalists | Canadian Automobile Journalists Association |
| Writers Guild of Canada | Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec |

The news media have undergone huge cutbacks over recent decades. In Canada, thousands of jobs have been cut, local TV stations have closed or cut back, local radio news other than CBC has virtually disappeared.

An American example illustrates the trend: At the time of Watergate (Woodward & Bernstein), the *Washington Post* employed 300 reporters. Today, it employs 60.

These changes have enormously impacted the workload of journalists and how journalism is practised. The days of specialized beat reporters with in-depth knowledge of a particular area and time to dig for a story are almost gone. A typical reporter may work on three unrelated stories a day: the time pressure they work under is tremendous. Display a little courtesy and understanding of journalists' time pressures when you interact with them.

Who decides whether a story get covered?

Producers, editors, columnists, commentators, hosts, reporters, and freelancers are all involved in deciding what to cover and how to cover it but editors and producers have the final say.

Freelancers typically have to pitch story ideas to an editor and get them accepted; the editor decides whether to accept the story idea.

While reporters may suggest stories, ultimately it is an editor or producer who decides whether it gets covered and how it will be slanted. Even after a story is written or filmed, an editor or producer may decide to kill the story or to change it substantially.

Editors are hired and promoted because the publisher or owner believes they have good editorial judgement. One important element of good judgement is not running stories the publisher would disapprove of. Every editor knows that, and every journalist who hopes to keep his or her job or get promoted knows that.

What makes a story 'newsworthy'?

A story is newsworthy if an editor or other gatekeeper decides it is.

Judgements of newsworthiness depend in part on the mandate or target audience, eg:

- Local community papers typically only cover news that takes place in their community or directly affect their community.
- Specialized papers and magazines cover news related to their field, e.g.:
 - *The Western Producer* covers news related to farmers and agriculture;
 - *The Medical Post* covers news related to doctors and health care;
 - *Chatelaine* and *Châtelaine* cover issues and ideas that are important to women.
 - *Fifty-Five Plus* features stories relevant to seniors;
 - *The Afghan Post* covers news about Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora in Canada.

Some criteria of newsworthiness:

- Is it timely?
- Is it interesting?
- Is it local or does it have a local angle?
- Is there conflict?
- Does it have drama, emotion, human interest?
- Is it relevant to our readers/audience?
- Is it important?
- The media are more interested in the specific than the general.
- The media want stories, not information or analysis. Ask: what is the story?

What is the media business about?

Most media are business corporations that exist to make money for their owners and investors. (The CBC is an exception but is subject to strong government pressure to be ‘business-like’.)

Most media make their money predominately through selling advertising. (Some depend on subscriptions or other sources of revenue, but they are relatively unusual.)

To make money selling advertising means having viewers or readers likely to buy what advertisers are selling. Advertisers prefer consumers who have money to spend, the more affluent the better, creating a continuing incentive for most media to feature content that will appeal to affluent demographics.

Chomsky and Herman refer to advertising as a ‘license to do business’. Only those media who receive the approval of corporate advertisers survive and thrive. Those whose ‘editorial environment’ does not meet with advertisers’ approval won’t get enough advertising to survive. Media owners will therefore take care to refrain from featuring content that runs counter to their advertisers’ interests.

The influence of advertising on media formats

Advertising influences not only the content but the form of the news media, particularly the broadcast media. Modern advertising consists of brief messages with the simplest of content. In fact, almost all advertising contains the same essential message in slight variations.

The message is **“Buy this”**

Typical variants are:

Buy this and you will be attractive.

Buy this and you will be cool.

Buy this and you will be successful.

Buy this and your children will be happy and successful.

Buy this and your dog will be healthy and happy.

These messages are ideally suited to the ‘soundbite’ structure of modern electronic media. The broadcast media use the soundbite model of news because that’s the context best suited for an advertising-dominated media environment.

While this structure works well for advertising messages, it is ill-suited for presenting complicated issues and complex ideas — which is to say, almost all issues and almost all ideas.

In a broadcast news story on a controversial issue, the average soundbite presenting the view of someone involved on one side or another of the issue is **eight seconds**. Under unusual circumstances, a soundbite may be given as much as 15 seconds. That’s the maximum allocated to someone to articulate a position on a major issue, be it global warming, the war in Afghanistan, social assistance rates, health care privatization, etc.

Your challenge: to use a format designed for saying “Buy this” to say “Don’t buy the status quo. Here’s why.”

Things which need not be said and things which cannot be said

The dominant media share certain assumptions which form the invariable background to their view of the world. These assumptions are so taken for granted that those who hold them may not even be aware that they hold them, any more than most of us are aware at any particular moment that we are breathing. They include:

- Capitalism is the only possible economic system.
 - What's good for business is good for everyone.
 - Private enterprise is better at doing things.
 - Growth is good.
 - Acquiring things is the key to happiness.
 - Everyone has to compete with everyone else and accept economic insecurity
 - There is no alternative to the status quo.
- Divide and rule: capitalism's ideological system depends on dividing people against each other, continuously undermining any idea of people uniting on the basis of common interests. The media with their built-in preference for conflict play a crucial role in this.

There are also certain things which cannot be said. Since the dominant media are capitalist corporations who make their money from advertisers whose message is "Buy This", no media corporation can make itself the vehicle for a message that repeatedly and consistently says "Stop Growth – Stop Capitalism – Save the Planet". Calls for economic boycotts will almost never be given media coverage, and most media refuse to run even paid ads for 'Buy-Nothing Day'.

This is one of the hard limits, and challenges, of trying to use the dominant media to communicate a radical message:

- Capitalism cannot exist without growth.
- The planet cannot continue to exist unless we stop growing.
- Therefore capitalism has to end.

How do we get that message out using capitalist media utterly dependent on advertising designed to encourage consumption and growth?

There are also ideas which the media will accept when they come from the right but not when they come from the left. For example:

Class conflict: the dominant media are utterly hostile to any suggestion from the left that the interests of the business class are opposed to the interests of working people. Yet in the business pages, written for investors and executives, that conflict is frequently referred to in a matter-of-fact way.

Revolution: The right frequently calls for revolution – Mike Harris' Common Sense Revolution, the American Tea Partiers, the current British Conservatives – and the media happily transmits those calls in a positive context. A left-wing call for revolution would meet with hysterical media attacks.

Regardless of these underlying assumptions, keep in mind that the individual reporter you are dealing with may be genuinely open and receptive to new ideas. Treat them with respect and present your ideas as honestly and persuasively as you can.

The image of the media as neutral and open means that a certain amount of dissent is permitted and even welcomed to create the appearance of diversity. This means alternative information and ideas and critical points of view can leak into the mainstream media from time to time.

"It makes sense to keep a realistic grasp of the factors that limit and distort the media product, while at the same time recognizing the many opportunities the media offer to introduce new perspectives and understanding. Many fine journalists, commentators, and activists have shown how much can be achieved with dedication and commitment."

- Noam Chomsky

Media Strategy

Getting media coverage is not a one-shot thing, any more than working for social change is a short-term commitment. If the media are part of your strategy for social change, you need to work on media relations consistently and strategically.

A media strategy includes thinking about what you want to gain from media coverage and which media you are most interested in reaching. Will you aggressively pursue media attention, or whether you will simply make yourself available to respond to media calls?

Most people get their news from the mainstream media. The mainstream media reach huge numbers of people. If we want to reach those people, we need a strategy that realistically assesses the limitations and opportunities of using those media.

Poorly planned and executed public relations may just result in not getting publicity, but it can also result in getting bad publicity.

Your message has to be repeated over and over again to get through. Effective lobbying organizations, (e.g. right-wing think tanks) send out their messages countless times in many many different formats. Successful advertisers plan campaigns to drive a message home, and after one campaign is finished, it is followed by another, so that the brand or product or company remains prominent.

Important as planning is, it's also important to be an opportunist in the sense of being able to respond quickly to changing circumstances and taking advantage of opportunities that present themselves. Circumstances sometimes have a way of sweeping aside even the best-laid plans in not much more than an instant. Trust your vision and your principles, and you'll be equipped to adjust your plans and strategy.

You may know the old question: 'What's the best time to plant a tree?' The answer is "20 years ago".

The same wisdom applies to building up your media profile: the best time to do it is well before you need media attention. Work at creating materials (e.g. media kits, FAQs, backgrounders) which can be provided to the media when needed. Try to interact regularly with the media, even if only by issuing news releases, so they know your track record and positions. Always be professional and polite in dealing with journalists: they are not your allies, but they are not your enemies either. They too can and should be educated about the issues, and courteous clear communication helps to accomplish that.

When planning your media strategy, spend some time critiquing your existing publicity materials and efforts. Are they effective? How could they be improved?

About **SOURCES** (www.sources.com): At *SOURCES* we specialize in helping organizations raise their profile and get media coverage. *SOURCES* provides each member organization with a permanent media landing page and with a presence on every Topic Page relevant to the organization. Organizations can post as many news releases and policy statements as they want, announce events in the *Calendar*, include video clips and promote their books, DVDs, and periodicals. Several thousand journalists a day use *SOURCES* to find spokespersons and experts. The general public uses the site too to get information about issues: the site gets about 600,000 page views a month. For info see www.sources.com.

Frames

For each story you need to identify the ‘frame’ for the issue as you see it. This defines **the essence of the issue as you see it: how you want people to see the issue.**

In framing an issue you may have to counter the way the media currently tend to frame the issue, e.g.

The media often frame environmental issues in terms of “**jobs vs. environment**”,

i.e. if you act on environmental concerns, you are costing people jobs.

You may want to frame it as “**sustainable green economy = more and better jobs.**”

A common frame for Israel/Palestine issues is “**Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state**”.

You might want to frame your approach as “**a democratic secular state with equal rights for all**”.

In proposing an alternative frame, you want to avoid referring to the existing frame directly.

If you refer to it directly, you can end up reinforcing it.

Another obstacle you have to contend with is the ‘soundbite’ nature of the electronic media in particular. News is presented as a series of unrelated events that happen every day. Much of it is focused on individuals and their problems: crime victims, accident victims, celebrities, etc. The very nature of the news business excludes context. News tends to ignore background and relationships.

Choose a positive solution-oriented frame for your issues. A “Chicken Little” message that seems to say “the sky is falling in, things are terrible, it’s your fault, you have to lower your living standards” isn’t going to win many people over. A “Little Engine That Could” message that says “we can work together to overcome these obstacles is much more likely to win people over.

Remember that many people (not just the media) have deeply held preconceptions that make them instinctively resistant to a new way of looking at things or even looking at evidence that challenges their preconceptions. The dominant assumption that no real change is possible can make proposed alternatives or solutions seem unrealistic or impossible.

Learn from the right, who are much better at framing issues than the left. (Of course, they also benefit from favourable coverage in the media, which they largely own, and vastly greater financial resources.) The right uses terms like “tax relief” to evoke the image of rescuing hard-working people from excessive taxation. This brings them support from people who would not support a program of “tax cuts for the rich and increased costs for everybody else”.

Deciding how to frame issues is not just a media relations task but a key challenge for developing strategies for social change.

Hooks

A hook is a way of pitching the story in a way designed to interest the media. Essentially this is the feature or aspect of the story that you use to entice or persuade the media, or selected media, to cover it. If we want to use fishing metaphors, we might actually want to call it the ‘bait’. But ‘hook’ is the established term. Sometimes your hook may be a staged event or a gimmick.

Ask yourself: why would the media want to cover this story? What about this story is newsworthy from the point of view of a media gatekeeper? What makes it interesting or noteworthy?

You may have one hook for the story, or you may have more than one, aimed at different media. For example, for a local newspaper, your hook might be the involvement of a local resident in the story. For a senior’s publication, it might be how the issue affects seniors. For a health-related publication, you might pitch the health impacts of the issue. The story is essentially the same, but you may want to vary the headline and first paragraph, at least, to customize it for the particular medium you are contacting. Consider the local angle to national stories and the national implications of local stories.

Media Releases (News Releases)

- Make it short, preferably one page. (Exceptions: when dealing with a complicated issue involving statistics or when responding to allegations or correcting the record, when more detail is essential.)
- Use clear ordinary language.
- A media release parallels the structure of an actual news story.
- It must have a **catchy headline** that draws the reader in
- The first paragraph summarizes the basic message of the release.
- Be concise, especially in the headline and first sentence. You are writing to appeal to media professionals who specialize in three-word headlines and eight-second soundbites. Write in the active voice. Use short sentences (maximum 18 words). What you have to say must jump off the page if you are going to make it past the first glance.
- Use word pictures (“dead birds lying on the shore” rather than “significant waterfowl mortality”).
- Include quotes. Support the points made in the release with quotations from people who are knowledgeable about and/or affected by the problem. Quote members of your organization rather than baldly state your views. Rather than say, “we think the proposed legislation sucks”, say “According to Dr. Heather Jones, ‘the new legislation will jeopardize patient care’”.
- Include the Five W’s and Two H’s: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, How Much.
- Avoid acronyms and jargon. Spell out terms and names in full.
- Make it clear who the release is coming from. Make sure it has the date. Include the name or names of people in your organization who can be reached before and after office hours. One unanswered phone can “turn off” a reporter on a bad day.
- Pay attention to the appearance of the release. It should look clean and well laid-out. Don’t cram text onto the page. Vary the length of paragraphs, but keep them all relatively short.
- The major media receive hundreds of news releases a day. Most of them end up in the garbage. Make sure yours doesn’t by making it interesting, informative and professional.
- If you have useful or essential background material, send it as a separate document with its own headline clearly distinguishable from the release itself. If sending your release by email, never send attachments: most media email accounts block attachments. Instead, put a link in your email to the location on your website where the document can be found.
- In some instances, you may want to do more than one release with different slants for different media. For example, a release questioning the safety of a pesticide may lead with the risk to consumers when sent to consumer health publications, but may lead with the danger to the farmers who apply it when sent to farm publications. Both releases will make essentially the same points (you certainly don’t want to be found to be sending out conflicting messages) but they may make those points in a different order, and may elaborate more on one aspect in one release, and more on another point in a second release.
- If possible, consider making your release available in more than one language to widen the potential audience. In Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver especially, there are many ‘ethnic’ papers with substantial circulations. Some of them are also more open to stories with a progressive slant than the mainstream corporate media.

Distributing your media releases

- Ask: who is your target audience? Which media reach your target audience(s)?
- **Media Lists:** Unless you are interested in a very limited number of media outlets, it is more cost-effective to buy a media list than to create and maintain your own. Maintaining a media list of any size is insanely time-consuming. For \$109.95 a year you can get a copy of the Media Names & Numbers print directory plus access to the online database. See www.sources.com/MNN/
- Your own media contacts: There may be some media outlets who consistently show interest in your organization. You may have direct relationships with a few journalists and editors. There likely won't be a lot of them, but you will want to keep track of friendly media and journalists.
- Don't forget community media, ethnic media, special-interest and niche publications, student papers, etc. Toronto alone has 11 daily newspapers and three others which publish several times a week. You probably know the six English ones, but make sure you know the others too.
- Always include Canadian Press (**CP**) on your list if you have a story that you think merits national coverage. Almost all the major media in the country subscribe to CP, so getting your story picked up by CP will land it in newsrooms across the country and increase the odds they will run it too.
- News releases can be distributed in a targeted way or in broadcast way. An example of a targeted release might be one that deals with an issue specific to a particular geographic location where you only want to reach the media that serve that location.
- Means of distributing news releases include **fax, email, news release services**, and your own **website** (you may set up your own **RSS** feed on your site if you release new information frequently enough to justify it.) Sending releases by mail is too slow, and courier is too expensive. Hand delivery is feasible if you are in a small town with only a handful of media outlets.
- You can also phone selected media to inform them of an event that you'd like them to cover.
- It is tempting to use email because it's easy and free, but the disadvantage is that a significant proportion of your emails never arrive at their destination because they are blocked by spam filters, and of those that arrive, many are deleted without being read.
- **Fax is more reliable** and more likely to reach its destination. For most media outlets, one fax to the main news fax number will suffice. However, for the CBC it is necessary to send individual faxes to each program you want to reach, because each program has its own number and its own producers who make decisions about what stories to cover.
- **Your own website:** You should post your news release on your own site, but it won't likely reach a lot of media on its own. Setting up an RSS feed is something to consider if you produce a lot of fresh content on your website but typically there won't be many journalists subscribing.
- **News release services** will post your release on a media website and will also send them out via a feed that the media subscribe to. *SOURCES* (www.sources.com) charges an annual fee starting at \$288 per year which allows you to issue as many releases as you want. CNW and BusinessWire charge on a per-release basis, the cost of a single release is typically \$300 – 700.
- **RSS:** Is a means by which releases (or other content) are fed into a 'newsfeed' which people (such as journalists) can subscribe to individually, usually based on content criteria (e.g. a user may subscribe to stories about alternate energy or wind energy). RSS feeds also go to aggregator sites which accumulate the content of thousands of individual feeds, allowing users to search the aggregator site for content.
- **Google** and other search engines: Google, Yahoo, Bing and other search engines are means by which your news release can quickly become visible to people who aren't on your list. When your release appears on a news release website like CNW or *SOURCES*, the release will show up in Google's results within an hour (see sample pages for an example of how a Google search brings up news releases in its top page of results).
- **Websites** that deal with your issue: Don't forget to send your release to websites and organizations that deal with your issue. They may post it, and then users of that site (journalists or the general public) may then find it there.

Interviews and contacts with the media

- An interview may be by phone, or it may be in-person. A reporter may be calling to interview you then and there, or they may be calling to set up an interview later. Clarify this at the beginning of the call. Remember that everything is on the record from the moment you start talking. If you are being approached by a radio talk show, the initial call may be a pre-interview to see if you'd make a good guest.
- Respond to media calls promptly. Being helpful with journalists won't guarantee that they'll cover your story. Being unhelpful, failing to return calls on time, missing deadlines, etc., will make it much less likely they'll cover it.
- If you have sent out a media release, you have to have a spokesperson available for interviews. Many organizations list two or three spokespersons to ensure a journalist will be able to reach someone.
- If you are listed as a media source, e.g. in *SOURCES*, or on your own website, it is importantly you return calls promptly. Reporters will quickly move on to another source if they can't reach you.
- If a reporter calls you unexpectedly (i.e. not as a result of you having sent out a release, but because they've found you listed as someone involved in an organization or issue), take the time to ask a few questions and take notes: What paper/station are they with? What is the story they are working on? What angle are they approaching it from? What is their deadline? Do they want to do the interview now, on the phone, or do they want to do it on location or at the studio? How long will the interview last? Are they referring to a report or document? Can you provide them with your own documentation? If they want to do the interview immediately, on the phone, you may wish to say that you are in the middle of something and offer to get back in 15 or 20 minutes. This gives you an opportunity to prepare while respecting their deadline.
- Always call back. If you believe you are not the best person to do the interview, say so, and suggest an alternative if possible.
- Make sure you are well researched and prepared on the factual and analytical background of your subject matter. You may be nervous and prone to forget things during a media interview; it helps to have thoroughly mastered your subject matter. Be familiar with recent developments and recent news stories about the subject. You don't want a reporter who has done his or her homework to have the advantage over you by being better prepared than you are.
- Remember that journalists are doing the work they do to make a living. They aren't doing it because they are in favour or opposed to your cause. Your relationship to them is a professional or business relationship, not a personal relationship.
- Don't automatically judge reporters by who they work for. The fact that a reporter works at a particular publication or station of which you have a low opinion does not necessarily mean that s/he shares the agenda, standards, or viewpoint of that publication. Reporters get jobs where they can while waiting for something better to come along. Give them the benefit of the doubt, while not naively assuming the best.

“Success in getting your story across in most Canadian mainline media today depends mainly on how well your story fits with the media’s pre-judgments about what is, and what matters. These pre-judgments in the final analysis mainly serve the status quo. They do not necessarily -- in fact do not usually -- square with historical accuracy or relevance, social responsibility, justice, scholarly analysis or logic. Therefore anyone or any organization with ‘idealistic’ or ‘oddball’ ideas that threaten the status quo faces a series of filters and outright blockages. Notwithstanding this uphill nature of gaining media access it is a grave error of intellect and attitude to consider the situation hopeless or monolithic.”

- Barrie Zwicker (Sources Publisher 1977 – 1999), Selected Tips for Getting Your Story Across in the News Media, November 1985

Preparing for the interview

- Plan your key message points. (See also “Frames”) Write them down and rehearse them out loud. These are your “aces” which you must play during the interview.
- Think in terms of quotes and headlines.
- A news interview may last five or ten minutes or longer, so you must be able to speak articulately and in some depth about the issue if you are going to do an interview about it.
- Out of that interview, a typical TV news story will only use one clip lasting 8 to 15 seconds. **You must be able to articulate your key message in that time.** A print story will use quotes from you of comparable length.
- Be clear in your own mind about who your audience is. **You are speaking through the journalist to your real audience, i.e. the public,** or some particular section of the public.
- If possible role-play the interview with a member of your organization. Think of tough questions you may be asked and practise how you will answer them.

During the Interview

- An interview is not a conversation. It is a structured ritual with definite rules. Make sure you understand the game and how it works. Always remember you are talking to a journalist.
- Make sure you say what you want to say and nothing else. Don’t be drawn into saying something you don’t want to say. Nothing is off the record.
- Make sure everything you say is true and can be backed up. Don’t guess at answers or make up ‘facts’ on the fly. One incorrect statement or unsubstantiated opinion can undermine your whole message.
- Listen carefully to each of the reporter’s questions. Questions which seem to be offbase can be a sign that the reporter doesn’t really understand the topic. If you detect this, expand more on your answers and give more context so the reporter gains a clearer understanding.
- Be calm, authoritative, and present your case. At the same time, show that you care about the issue and explain why you care.
- Use examples to illustrate your point.
- Don’t let yourself be drawn into arguments or irrelevancies.
- Respond to emotionally loaded issues and questions with sensitivity. Don’t dismiss the misfortunes of others.
- Avoid direct attacks on your opponents. Criticize policies and actions, not individuals. You’ll come across better if you seem calm and reasonable rather than loudly angry.
- If you find yourself under attack (rare, but it can happen) respond calmly and rationally. The audience will side with the polite calm person who is under attack.
- Don’t let the questioner put words in your mouth, and don’t repeat incorrect formulations when responding to them. If the interviewer asks “Won’t the policies you propose cost thousands of people their jobs”, don’t reply by saying “No, it won’t cost thousands of people their jobs”. That just sets you up for a headline that says “Environmentalists deny thousands of jobs to be lost”. A better response might be “Our policies will lead to increased employment opportunities while protecting our environment for future generations.”
- Don’t be drawn by silence. A common technique in studio interviews is for the interviewer to remain quiet to see if you start to ramble to end the silence. If this happens, simply remain quiet, smile, and look expectant until the interviewer asks the next questions.

Problem questions

- Question states a false premise
 - Don't nod in response to the question. It looks like you're agreeing.
 - Calmly state why the premise is false. "I wouldn't say that" or "the way I'd put it is."
- Hypothetical questions
 - Don't speculate
- Multiple question
 - Pick the aspect of the question you want to reply to, and reply to that.

Bridging

Bridging is the art of moving from a topic or question that you don't like to one that you do like. If an interviewer is leading the interview in a direction that you think is unhelpful, bridging is your technique for steering the interview back to the important points that you are trying to communicate.

There are several techniques for bridging from a question that contains incorrect assumptions or that is going off the issue as you see it.

- Refocus: "The real issue is"
- False 'either-or' premise
 - "Neither... the issue is..."
- Refocus on the large picture: "The big picture is..."
- Give an example: "One example of this is..."

For activists, bridging involves not only bridging from an off-track topic to the issue you want to talk about, but also bridging from the status-quo assumptions contained in the question to different assumptions. In other words, you are trying to shift the frame.

- "The issue is whether corporate profits are more important than the future of our children."
- "We believe in a democratic state with equal rights for everyone. No one should be discriminated against because of their religion or ethnic origin."
- "The real question is whether we can afford tax breaks for extremely rich corporations while public services are being run into the ground."
- "This benefits the rich at the expense of working class people and the poor."
- "This process violates the basic principles of democracy. This decision cannot be made behind closed doors while the people affected by it are excluded."

Op-Eds

- Op-Ed articles are articles printed on the page in the newspaper across from the editorial page. Many newspapers accept outside submissions for these pages.
- Length is typically 700 – 1000 words.
- Inquire first (usually there is an op-ed editor) to see whether they would be interested in your article.
- An op-ed can be a good way to set out your views on an issue in greater detail – and you get to write it, although the editor may ask for changes.

Letters to the Editor

Writing letters to the editor is an effective and inexpensive way of getting publicity for your point of view and your organization.

Letters to the editor are published by almost all publications, from newspapers and magazines with a national circulation, like the *Globe and Mail* and *Maclean's*, to community newspapers, special-interest magazines, trade publications, and newsletters.

A letter to the editor may not have the glamour of splashier forms of media exposure, but the letters pages are among the most widely read sections of almost all periodicals.

Guidelines for writing a letter to the editor:

- Make it brief. 100 to 150 words should be the maximum, fewer if possible.
- Confine yourself to one subject. Make one point and make it clearly. You or your organization undoubtedly have views about many issues, but in a letter to the editor, you've can make one only point effectively.
- To help you focus your letter, summarize the point you are trying to make in a single phrase or sentence before you begin writing the text of your letter. Use this to guide you in writing the letter.
- You can and should bring in supporting evidence and arguments, but they should all be in support of your main point. Don't digress.
- Your main point can be specific or broad, e.g. "The proposed landfill site will pollute Otter Creek" or "If we don't stop overfishing, the world's oceans will become deserts".
- If possible, have someone else read or edit your letter before sending it off. It's hard to judge one's own writing objectively.
- If you are writing on behalf of an organization, make it clear that you are speaking on its behalf. However, be aware that newspapers tend to favour letters from individuals over letters from organizations.
- Avoid personal attacks or disparaging the motives of someone you disagree with. Stick to the issue and the facts.
- Send your letter off quickly, while the issue is fresh, preferably the same day. The chances of your letter being printed diminishes the more time goes by.
- Fax your letter, or send it by E-mail, or deliver it by hand. Sending it by mail may delay its arrival by two or three crucial days.
- Remember to include your name, address, and phone number with the letter. Many publications have a policy of contacting the letter writer to confirm that s/he is truly the author of the letter.

Selected Resources

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Connexions

Connecting People – Connecting Issues

Connexions – full name **Connexions Information Sharing Services** – is an online resource centre for organizations and individuals working for social justice.

Founded in 1975 as a networking tool for Canadian anti-poverty activists and social justice groups, Connexions has been online at www.connexions.org since 1995.

Connexions also maintains the Connexions Archive, a library of documents and resources created by citizen activists spanning decades of activism. By digitizing them we make them available to a wider national and international public of activists, students, scholars, and interested individuals.

Among the resources available at **Connexions.org**:

The Connexions Calendar

Probably Canada's most extensive social change calendar, featuring a wide variety of events concerned with social and environmental issues. At www.connexions.org/CxCalendar.htm. Progressive organizations are welcome to feature the calendar on their websites, or link to it.

Progressive News

Connexions.org features up-to-date news feeds from progressive current events sites such as *LabourStart*, *Straight Goods*, *Infoshop.org*, *The Progressive*, the *International Middle East Media Centre*, *The Nation*, the *Tyee*, *CounterCurrents*, and *OneWorld.net*.

The Connexions Library

One of the largest human-indexed archives of social change documents in existence. The Connexions Library catalogues several thousand full-text documents that are available online, as well as thousands of additional bibliographic references for books, articles, reports, films, and periodicals contained in the physical Connexions archive or in other libraries and archives.

One of the purposes of the Connexions Library and the Connexions Archive is to keep alive the memories, experiences, strategies and lessons of all those who have worked for social justice over the decades. We believe that we can build on the past to build a better future.

One of the key elements of the Connexions Library is the extensive subject index used to identify resources. Using more than 20,000 topics, the subject index helps users who may originally find the site through Google to pursue issues in more depth. Searchers for justice will find works by rebel authors from Mary Woolstonecraft and Karl Marx to Noam Chomsky and Arundhati Roy.

The Connexions Directory

Connexions maintains an online directory of associations and NGOs. Formerly published in print as *The Connexions Annual*, the directory is now undergoing an extensive revision to bring listings up to date and add more organizations. Available at www.connexions.org.

Israel/Palestine: Resources for peace, justice, and human rights

A Web gateway to selected resources on Palestine and Israel, including websites, books, documentaries, videos, documents and articles for those who believe that a solution to the conflict is possible only on the basis of justice, equality, respect for human rights and an end to Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Visions, Manifestos, and Political Statements

Connexions has compiled an wide-ranging online collection of political programs and vision statements dating from 1776 (Tom Paine's *Common Sense*) to the present. Here, in one place, you can find the *People's Charter* of 1837, the *Communist Manifesto*, the manifesto of the Paris Commune of 1871, the CCF's *Regina Manifesto* and *Winnipeg Declaration*, the *Freedom Charter* of the African National Congress, the *Port Huron Statement*, the *Arusha Declaration*, the *Waffle Manifesto*, the *Manifesto of the Third Camp*, and *Walking We Ask Questions* (2008).

Connexions' vision (the sound-byte version)

Connexions works to build links between people who are striving to create positive solutions to critical social, environmental, economic, and international problems. Connexions features resources reflecting a diversity of viewpoints and approaches to social change within our overall mandate of support for democracy, civil liberties, freedom of speech, universal human rights, secularism, equality, economic justice, environmental responsibility, and the creation and preservation of community. We reject hatred, racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism or other forms of discrimination such as those based on gender, sexual orientation, age, and ethnicity.

Volunteers

Connexions is a voluntary organization. We welcome volunteers to help with all aspects of the project from data entry to fundraising, and we offer some internships for individuals looking to gain experience with e-archiving and online publishing in a social justice context.

Translators

Connexions is engaged in an ongoing process of translating documents and subject index terms into other languages. Volunteer translators are always needed. Languages needed include French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Chinese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Farsi, and Korean.

Media and Government Lists and Directories

Connexions sells *Media Names & Numbers*, the directory of Canada's media, and *Parliamentary Names & Numbers*, the directory of Canada's federal and provincial governments. Both directories are available in print, online, and mail-merge database formats.

Media Names & Numbers lists more than 6,000 print and broadcast media including TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, and ethnic publications. *Parliamentary Names & Numbers* lists MPs, Senators, provincial legislators, caucus and critic duties, committees, ministries, agencies, embassies. Both are extensively cross-indexed by subject and location. Single-user subs are \$109.95/year for *Media Names & Numbers* and \$75/year for *Parliamentary Names & Numbers*. To subscribe call 416-964-7799 or go to www.connexions.org/Subscriptions.htm

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You can read about Connexions in Wikipedia.

See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connexions_\(Information_Sharing_Services\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connexions_(Information_Sharing_Services))

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