



SECTION THREE

MOVING YOUR MESSAGE

TOOLS AND TACTICS FOR BEING HEARD

HOW DO YOU BROADCAST the compelling frames and messages you've created? How do you use the media to reform the media?

The following pages offer tips for maximizing the chances that a journalist will tell the story you want told. You'll learn about finding the right reporter for the job, writing releases that get read and pitching like a pro.

Beyond the nuts and bolts, this section also contains inspiring stories of how media reform and media justice organizations have used creative communications tactics to get the word out. The final chapter in this section points you towards a particularly effective way to deliver your message—the Op Ed.

Even in this era of increasing media consolidation, there are still plenty of reporters and editors looking to tell the story of community media and how big media impacts our nation. Help them tell it right.

WORKING THE NEWSROOM

By Laura Weide

Adapted from *SPIN Works!*

YOUR PRESS RELEASE may be brilliant, but if it doesn't get into the right hands, it won't become news. Make sure to target the best journalists to cover your story by doing your research ahead of time.

Large news departments have different people who cover discrete beats. Smaller news organizations will have less-defined beats, but may have particular journalists who specialize in multiple areas. Journalists like it when you know their beat and can reference related articles they have written, so it always helps to do your homework first.

Pitching Media to Media

Don't assume you'll face hostility when approaching journalists about media issues. Remember, thanks to consolidation, journalists are seeing their colleagues laid off left and right, and many entered the field to serve the public. In these pages, you'll find tips and best practices from veterans of the media critique. You'll learn how to:

- get your foot in the door.
- spotlight evidence reporters can use.
- provide a compelling story that hooks reporters in and keeps them interested.

When pitching a story to a media outlet, your targets will be reporters and their immediate editors. These are the venues and individuals you will want to reach:

Newspaper: Reporters, News Editor, Business Editor, Technology Editor, Features Editor.

TV: The Planning Editor decides major stories and investigative pieces. If you are pitching a same-day story, call the Assignment Editor. Call specific reporters on your beat.

Wire Services: Editors of all stripes keep an eye on the newswires for interesting and news-worthy stories. Getting listed on a national or regional wire helps legitimize your event and reaches editors and freelancers who are not on your list. The Datebook Editor decides what events will be listed on the wire. Some wire services, like the AP, also cover their own news stories. The Datebook Editor does not make these assignments, so you will need to contact the Assignment Editor or ask if there is a writer or editor more matched to your story. Regional wire services, like the Bay City News Service, only post stories with a regional hook.

Radio: News Directors usually assign stories to individual reporters. Radio talk show producers make decisions about topics and guests.

Web sites: All major news outlets have online versions of their papers, many with additional content and their own set of editors. As you build your contacts, you can find out what angles these online editors might be particularly interested in. For example, if there is a big breaking national story, you might offer first-person testimonials from a local angle that integrates into the larger story.

Blogs: Bloggers are a world unto themselves—a world it's increasingly important to inhabit or at least visit. Sift the blogosphere to find bloggers who are influential and write about your issue.

For more on researching and pitching bloggers, see page 53.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS

By Laura Weide

Adapted from *SPIN Works!*

CULTIVATING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS with reporters is critical for the success of your communications plan. While the “who you know” rule has always been a boost for activists seeking media attention, media consolidation—with fewer reporters having to sort through more events to decide what to cover—makes personal relationships even more critical. You can see the effect of relationships already when you watch the news for a month and notice many of the same people and groups repeatedly referenced.

So how do you develop these relationships? Here are some media pointers to live by.

- **Pick up the phone.** Your press release can languish in an inbox unless you follow-up with short phone calls. We can’t over-emphasize the importance of direct communication with media to get on their radar and have a reporter assigned to your story. Make calls in the morning, before the deadline crunch.
- **Be a resource.** Journalists will see you as a go-to source if you consistently offer accurate, up-to-date information, meet deadlines, deliver good soundbites and offer interesting angles. Provide other contacts to reporters, even from the other side, if requested.
- **Be accessible.** Journalists will move on to other sources if they are not able to reach you with one email and a phone call. Give reporters a direct line and put your cell phone number on your press release. Make yourself available at all times.
- **Know your facts.** If you do not know the answer to a reporter’s question, do not make up something. You can spin your response with a talking point, but if what they want is a specific fact or statistic, point them to someone who knows it.
- **Respect deadlines.** Find out about reporters’ deadlines: They live by them and they are inflexible. If you have not called back by 3 or 4 pm at a print newspaper, the reporter will get nervous. By 4:30, you will be out of the story. For TV news, get back to a reporter at least a couple of hours before airtime.
- **Appear more reasonable than your opponents.** Whoever appears more reasonable is ahead of the game. A typical frame you want to avoid is that of the “livid protestor” or “extremist.” Avoid getting boxed in by staking your ground in positive terms. Channel and convert your rage into a message that moves people to awareness and action.

For tips on building your media list and developing a media outreach timeline, visit www.spinproject.org/whosemedia.

Laura Weide is the co-founder of Spark Action, a communications consulting firm that specializes in shaping media in support of progressive agendas. She has facilitated hundreds of high-visibility print, electronic, radio and broadcast news stories on issue areas ranging from reproductive rights and sexuality to education reform. She teaches media-activism workshops and provides technical assistance to organizations looking to improve their media work.

SPIN Works!: A Media Guidebook for Communicating Values and Shaping Opinion is available at www.spinproject.org.

CASE STUDY

COURTING COVERAGE

The Media Mobilizing Project (MMP) is a Philadelphia-based organization that uses media and technology to connect diverse groups working for social and economic justice. MMP provides communications support for organizing campaigns and trains people to make their own media through classes in everything from video production to investigative journalism. MMP also works with its network organizations to advocate for media policy that benefits low-income communities—all with the goal of building a sustainable movement for change.

MMP received a burst of media coverage shortly after it became an independent organization in 2007, including articles in the New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia City Paper. Here, MMP Co-Founder Todd Wolfson, an independent journalist and activist, describes how the organization worked with reporters every step of the way to shape the stories being told.

—Isobel White

Media = Support

We know, for better and for worse, that the mass media confers legitimacy. We understand it's a game, but we wanted that legitimacy conferred on us because we thought it would help give us the institutional support we need to grow.

The Pitch that Fits

The pitch for the *New York Times* was very different than for the *City Paper*, because of who was going to read it and the length of the piece. For the *Times*, we knew the reporter wouldn't have much space for his story. It couldn't be very nuanced, but we still wanted it to be exciting. We focused our pitch on the community journalism aspects of our work. For the *City Paper*, an alternative weekly, we knew we'd have more space, and could lead the reporter towards a social justice organizing story that would help us with relationship-building among other progressive groups at the local level.

New York Times First Contact

Initially, the *New York Times* story was kind of a lucky break, because the reporter contacted us in the summer of 2007, after we got a grant from the Knight Foundation. He was interested, but the story also presented some challenges because he didn't want to come down to Philly. And he wanted to write about our video production classes, but our first round of classes was in Spanish and he doesn't speak Spanish.

Building the Relationship

From then on, it was the squeaky wheel syndrome. I kept him on the hook so that anytime we did anything I sent him a press release. When we got the *Philadelphia Inquirer* article, I sent him the link. I made sure he heard from us once a month. Sometimes he didn't reply, but I just kept trying.

Tailoring the Pitch

About six months later, when we did our first round of classes in English, I sent him an email saying, "this would be a great time to come down, because you'd be able to engage with the class." From there, he said "pick a weekend."

Right Story for the Job

What was more work was staying on top of the reporter. I must have talked to him for four or five hours. A story about community journalism and how low-income community members need to be digitally included is not really how we ultimately think of our work, but we knew it played best in the scope of possible narratives we could get.

Philadelphia City Paper Repeated Re-framing

The reporter writes about social justice organizing and had been wanting to write about new media. He contacted me in early 2007 to do a story about me in my role as an independ-

ent journalist. That really wasn't the story we wanted told, so we pushed back against that frame.

Then he wanted to tell a story about MMP as a single organization, but we really wanted him to see us as a network, and to look at the whole scope of what our network organizations are doing. And he wanted to tell a story in which the main measure of our effectiveness would be whether an organization we work with, like the taxi drivers' union, is getting their message into the mass media. Whereas we're trying to argue that new media can build a shared movement across fragmented struggles. We believe that what's exciting is how the taxi drivers are becoming part of a movement together with students and new immigrants and other marginalized groups.

Not Just One Hero

The media tends to want to tell the story of a heroic individual fighting against the odds; that story is fine, if it's all you can get, but it doesn't really portray what MMP is all about—which is that a network of organizations can work to support each other and build a movement for wide-scale change. That's a tougher story to tell but it is ultimately a lot more meaningful, particularly for a progressive audience. That's why we pushed that story with the *City Paper*. We knew we had enough space and we knew it's read by progressive people, so we wanted to make sure the story at least partially focused on what our work is really all about.

Disciplining the Message

We gave the *City Paper* reporter a list of about 30 people to contact. We made sure everyone who was going to speak understood our frames. We really pushed the leaders of our network organizations that we wanted the story to be about them. So in the first half of the article, he does person-

alize the story—but in the back half of the article he does the work we really wanted him to do.

Still a Challenge

Even with all the attention from mainstream press that MMP has gotten, we still want to improve the framing of our work and organizational

structure. Under the pressure to “find the story,” reporters who write about MMP have tended to focus on one character or personality, despite our insistence on highlighting the diversity of the network. This paints an inaccurate representation of MMP’s structure and leadership—in terms of race, gender, sexuality—a misrepresentation that

has both internal and external consequences.

End Results

We’ve gotten a lot of reaction to the *Times* article from foundations. And the *City Paper* article has netted us a bunch of new volunteers. In the end, both stories did their job.

MAKING NEWS THAT’S FIT TO PRINT: THE PRESS RELEASE

By Laura Weide

Adapted from *SPIN Works!*



© Sarah Smith / Media Mobilizing Project

ALL COMMUNICATIONS with the media must convey your core messages. The news release—a short standard document that communicates the importance of your event along with the basic who, what, where, when and why—is the basic method of communicating with reporters and editors.

Reporters sort through hundreds of releases a day, so write yours well, make it interesting and don’t forget to include all the salient information. Press releases are not a time to get funky with creative formatting; stick with the standard format on the next page to be sure that yours gets read.

Start by defining your frame and writing down the three most important points you would

want covered in a news story. Create a list of angles that make your story timely. Use this outline when writing your press release and pitches.

Your release should read like a news article, complete with quotes and statements of fact. Use an unbiased, third-person voice. If you think that the phrase “organizers say” waters down your point, write a direct quote.

Are you doing the reporter’s job for them by essentially writing the article? That’s one way to look at it—but the payoff is that if your release is very good, sometimes reporters will use significant portions of it and you will have written your own news.

Press Release vs. Press Alert

Think of a press release as the news item that you get to pen about your issue or event. It has a strong lead, a snappy headline and a lead paragraph that summarizes your pitch.

A press alert is a shorter piece covering the five W’s: Who, What, When, Where, Why. It serves as a reminder on the day of the event.

Some organizations create a post-event release that is sent out immediately after an important event, providing quotes from key speakers and detailing any decisions made or the number of people in attendance, if substantial. Post-event releases are sometimes picked up by reporters who could not attend the event.

- 1 **Organizational logo:** This should appear at the top of all releases. Organizational letterhead is often appropriate for this purpose. You can also list Web address.
- 2 **Provide name and phone number.** Ideally include cell and email address too. If you have more than one contact, include them all in a readable format.
- 3 **Use the distribution date of the release, even if it's not the date of your event.**
- 4 **An attention-grabbing headline is key to being noticed by busy reporters and editors.** Summarize your news in a one- to two-line headline that captures the larger frame of the news, communicates a sense of drama and pulls reporters into the story. You can also include a one- to two-line subheading with crucial details.
- 5 **Consider bullet-pointing What, Where and When under the headline.** Make it easy for reporters to find vital information. If you're publicizing an event and the location isn't well-known, provide cross streets or other markers.
- 6 **Dateline:** Use the location of the action, whether or not it's where you're located.
- 7 **Lead paragraph:** This is the most important paragraph in the body. It grabs attention and frames the issue for maximum media impact. Provide your most relevant details here. Do not try to explain everything, but do imagine yourself answering a reporter's questions of what, where and why now. Ask yourself what is most newsworthy about the story you're trying to tell. You can provide more key details in the second paragraph.
- 8 **Lead quote:** Within the first two to three paragraphs, there should be a compelling quote that further frames the issue and clarifies why it's important. Choose a spokesperson whose perspective is particularly central to the story.
- 9 **These links are particularly prominent because the story is about the report.** If you're simply providing further info, put links at the bottom of the release.
- 10 **Body of release:** Organize the remainder of your release in descending order of importance, known as the "inverted pyramid." Lay your base in the first two paragraphs and elaborate below.

SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

Edited Version



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: 2

Jen Howard, Free Press, (202) 265-1490, ext. 22

June 5, 2007 3

Pushed Off the Dial:

Media Consolidation Diminishes Diversity on the Radio 4

FCC Commissioners and Civil Rights Leaders React to New Study on the Shameful State of Radio Ownership by Women and People of Color 5

6 WASHINGTON — Reacting to a new Free Press study on radio ownership released today, national women's rights and civil rights leaders joined two Federal Communications Commissioners in condemning the FCC for its failure to address the low number of female and minority media owners. 7

8 "We found that women and people of color control just one-eighth of the country's full-power radio stations, despite comprising two-thirds of the population," said S. Derek Turner, Research Director of Free Press and author of *Off the Dial: How Media Consolidation Diminishes Diversity on the Radio*. "These results are stark and a cause for alarm. The FCC should be aware of the consequences before enacting any policies that could further media concentration."

The full report can be downloaded at http://www.freepress.net/docs/off_the_dial.pdf or http://www.stopbigmedia.com/files/off_the_dial.pdf 9

As the FCC considers eliminating longstanding media ownership limits, *Off the Dial* exposes how these changes could hasten the disappearance of the few female- and minority-controlled stations on the radio. On a national teleconference today, FCC Commissioners Jonathan Adelstein and Michael Copps blasted the agency's pro-consolidation policies for pushing out female and minority owners. 10

“This study presents fresh and challenging evidence about the lack of female and minority ownership in the radio industry,” Commissioner Copps said. “My fervent hope is that we can harness the shame of our failures and recommit ourselves to creating a media that reflects the diversity of the American people.” ¹¹

“Women and people of color have been left off the dial because the FCC has pursued policies that are far off the mark,” said Commissioner Adelstein. “It is our legal and moral obligation to promote diversity in the public airwaves. But as this landmark report shows, misguided policies have concentrated radio station ownership in a few hands and denied two-thirds of the American people an opportunity to serve the needs of their communities. The Commission needs to thoroughly study this report and develop a comprehensive strategy to remedy this injustice.”

Off the Dial found that the average local radio market has 16 white male-owned radio stations—but just one female-owned station and two minority-owned stations. Women own just 6% of all full-power radio stations, even though they comprise 51% of the population. People of color own just 7.7% of stations but make up 33% of the population. ¹²

“‘All day, all night, all white,’ clearly does not represent the diversity of American culture,” said Rev. Jesse Jackson, founder of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. “When people of color own just 7.7% of radio stations, but make up 33% of the population, we see how poor public policy decisions continue to lock more of the ‘Rainbow’ out of opportunities.”

“Commercial radio may be one of the most unfriendly environments for women and people of color,” said Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women. “Media consolidation has created an almost unbreakable glass ceiling at the top. The FCC must take action to promote more diverse ownership and end the white male stranglehold on the airwaves.”

Off the Dial shows that media consolidation is a barrier to ownership diversity. Female and minority owners are more likely to be local radio station owners and more likely to own a single station. *Off the Dial* also found that female and minority owners were more likely to have a female president or CEO and employ women as General Managers. ¹³

Read *Off the Dial: How Media Consolidation Diminishes Diversity on the Radio* at http://www.freepress.net/docs/off_the_dial.pdf or http://www.stopbigmedia.com/files/off_the_dial.pdf.

To read the earlier study on TV station ownership, *Out of the Picture*, go to http://www.stopbigmedia.com/files/out_of_the_picture.pdf.

¹⁴

Free Press (www.freepress.net) is a national, nonpartisan organization working to reform the media and involve the public in media policymaking. Through education, organizing and advocacy, we promote diverse and independent media ownership, strong public media and universal, affordable access to communications. ¹⁵

This release can be found online at <http://www.freepress.net/press/release.php?id=242>. ¹⁶

¹¹ *Quotes: Usually between one and three soundbites. If possible, write quotes for your spokespeople and ask for permission to attribute the quote to them.*

Quotes should be short and sharp. Take your core message and elaborate on it (as in a quote from an organizational representative) or personalize it (as in a quote from a community member personally affected).

¹² *Facts: Continue the inverted pyramid, layering in the most important facts to make your case. Save extra information for the press packet. Remember that any expression of opinion needs to be attributed.*

¹³ *Readability: Your reader needs to comprehend the information as quickly as possible. Use short sentences. Don't use jargon; translate all terms into language that reporters and your target audience will understand.*

¹⁴ *End with the symbol ### centered at the bottom of your release. If the release is more than one page, write “the name of your event or release issue, p. 2” at the top of the next page, and write “more” at the page breaks.*

¹⁵ *Boilerplate: At the end of your release, briefly describe your organization and direct reporters to your Web site for more information.*

¹⁶ *You can also restate contact information and any additional materials you may have for the media under the ### symbol. For instance, if you have a podcast or other related resources, present them here.*

WIND UP YOUR PITCHING ARM

By Laura Weide

Adapted from *SPIN Works!*

A **PITCH** is the act of convincing specific journalists that your story is more newsworthy than the hundreds of others on their desk. You can send a personalized pitch letter in advance, but to make sure your pitch has landed, you must pick up the phone.

What Is a Good Pitch?

A good pitch includes the frames and messages you've developed to state the larger problem, your organization's solution and the specific action you are calling for. Your success at pitching depends on how well you convince the reporter that your story is timely and should be told *now*, not filed away for some unspecified future coverage.

The trick with pitching is that you have only a few sentences to capture the journalist's attention. Sound human, relaxed and genuine about the reason for the call. Write yourself a pitch script and practice it a few times before you call your top targets, but be sure you don't sound like you are reading from a script. You can also call a few of your less-important targets to warm up your pitch.

Hook your media contact like a fish on a line with dramatic human interest, controversy or a local angle to a national story. Tie your story into major events, holidays, or anniversaries. Be prepared to offer multiple hooks. A reporter may have recently written on a related topic, but one of your angles may sound fresh.

For more on developing hooks, see page 21.

Tips

- Keep it brief.
- If you get voicemail, leave a short message with your pitch and contact information. Assume you'll have to call again the next day, or several hours later if the story is pressing. Feel free to call other journalists at the same outlet in the meantime. After two to three unreturned calls, don't call back on the same story.

- If the reporter you call is not interested or on another assignment, ask who you can speak to instead.
- The Ask: At the end of your conversation, don't forget to actually ask if they're interested in your story and/or if they will be attending your event.
- Target reporters who have written on similar issues and show you know their work. "Hi, I'm calling from _____, and that terrific piece you wrote last month on ____ made me think you would be interested in what is happening next week...."

Pitch Letters

A pitch letter is the personalized letter you will write to your top media contacts. Tailor each letter to the particular outlet. For instance, if you're pitching to a radio editor, mention the various shows that you think your spokespeople are appropriate for, and what questions the show can address by featuring them. Explain briefly how this information/interview will be appreciated by their audience. If you're pitching to a magazine, shape your pitch according to the magazine format. Suggest where your story would best fit in their publication. Do they have a page on emerging organizations? Moving stories of personal triumph? Or are you pitching to a writer known for hard-hitting investigative pieces? Help editors and reporters by presenting your story in a way that fits the format of their outlet.

Be sure to make your follow up call within one to two days after you send your pitch letter.

For tips on sending your release and a sample pitch script from MoveOn.org Civic Action, visit www.spinproject.org/whosemedial.

CASE STUDY

GOOD FACTS MAKE GREAT NEWS

By Beth McConnell

One way to garner media attention is to provide timely, well-researched information not available elsewhere. Whether it's a report, a poll or participatory research, new data can serve as a hook into a larger story. In the fall of 2007, the Media and Democracy Coalition released the results of a poll showing wide opposition to media consolidation. Below, MDC Executive Director Beth McConnell explains the group's approach and the remarkable results. —ed

As the FCC sought public comment on weakening media ownership rules, the Media and Democracy Coalition released a public opinion poll showing that opposition to media consolidation stretches across ethnic, generational and gender differences. The poll also showed that diverse individuals oppose lifting the newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership ban, a rule that was a prime target of elimination by FCC Chairman Martin and big media companies.

The poll was conceived of and conducted in the summer of 2007. Knowing the FCC would soon hold a public hearing in Washington D.C., we ensured the research could be completed and released to coincide with that hearing, held on October 31, 2007.

By releasing the results the same day of the hearing, we gave reporters data they could use when writing about the hearing, and a tool to help them describe the strong public response to Martin's plans. Results of the poll were mentioned in dozens of news outlets across the

country, including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post*.

We also ensured the results of the poll were made available to FCC Commissioners Jonathan Adelstein and Michael Capps, key allies in the fight to stop media consolidation. In his opening statement at the Washington, D.C. hearing, Commissioner Adelstein referenced the poll results as an example of what he'd seen at dozens of similar public hearings over the years—pleas from thousands of diverse individuals and organizations urging the FCC not to weaken media ownership rules. Commissioners Adelstein and Capps referenced the poll results again at a public hearing just two weeks later in Seattle, as evidence that the estimated 1,100 individuals there to testify in person were just a sample of the millions of Americans concerned about these issues.

The poll was also designed to help the Coalition reach out to a diversity of communities regarding media ownership. We ensured that a statistically significant number of Latinos and African Americans were included in the survey, and shared the results with civil rights organizations in need of messages to help make these issues

relevant to their constituents. We also ensured that the respondents shared mixed political views, as well as varied income categories.

We also posed additional questions to survey respondents to test specific messages among different communities, and designed the survey to segment this “message testing” from the public opinion research. This allowed us to create two distinct uses for the research: one internal, to help us refine our message, and another external, to help generate press and visibility.

The Coalition continues to use the results of the research as it reaches out to new organizations and seeks allies of varied political affiliations—and now works to overturn the FCC's eventual decision to weaken media ownership rules.

Beth McConnell is the Executive Director of the Media and Democracy Coalition. The Coalition is a collaboration of more than two dozen local and national organizations united to advance the public's voice in debates over media and telecommunications policies.



SPOKESFOLKS: SPEAKING OUT EFFECTIVELY FOR YOUR GROUP

Adapted from *SPIN Works!*



© Jake Wang 2007

Soundbites are short, snappy and quotable phrasings of your message. Imagine a 10-second quote in a news broadcast—that’s your soundbite. You can elaborate on a soundbite to educate reporters, but be sure to prepare your soundbites in advance and use them when the tape is rolling.

SOMETIMES THE MESSENGER is just as important as the message. That’s why it’s critical to learn how to be a more effective spokesperson yourself, and to develop these skills among people in your community. The best spokespersons are those who command media attention; present a poised, confident and persuasive image; and stay on message—no matter what is happening around them.

Reporters, rushing against deadlines, often don’t have time to call a dozen people looking for quotes. They tend to go with the designated spokesperson. Choose at least one official representative of your organization (Executive Director or board member) who is well-spoken, trusted to say the right things and has a command of the issues. Reporters may call this person at any time for a quote or background information.

Community members can also speak to the issues from a more personal, textured perspec-

tive. Diversify your list of spokespersons, so the same one or two people are not always being quoted. Use your position as a media activist to ensure that those rarely represented in the media are, in fact, out front representing your organization.

Whether you designate organizational leaders, community spokespersons or both, here are a few basic tips everyone should follow:

- Build confidence and poise through practicing your soundbites in advance. Write up obvious questions, and hone a one to three sentence response.
- Don’t try to explain everything in your soundbite. Remember, if you are being interviewed for print, unless it is for a feature story, your quote will be one to three sentences long. For TV, long answers will be edited out.
- Don’t be thrown off by a reporter’s questions. If it is a prescheduled interview, do your homework and prepare for the reporter’s style. With even the most rabid hosts, you can bring the question back to your main points: “John, the question most people care about is how we are going to ensure a diversity of viewpoints...” Stick to your main points and you’ll rise above the fray.
- Don’t repeat interviewer questions. You have only a short time to speak, and you don’t want to be quoted saying what you don’t think.
- Cut the “umms” out. We often use empty filler words as we think about the next thing to say. Make a point to practice speaking without saying “you know,” “like,” “umm,” etc.

For tips on staging media events and more on spokesperson skills—including a flyer developed by Free Press to help people prepare for FCC testimony—visit www.spinproject.org/whosmedia.



Alexandra Pates (left) and Stacy Erenberg speak out at the Chicago FCC hearing.

CASE STUDY

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

THE RIGHT SPOKESPERSON can go a long way toward reframing an issue. At the 2007 FCC hearings in Chicago, one consistent theme was the impact of media consolidation on the media's portrayal of people of color and other marginalized groups—and the benefits that would incur from a more diverse ownership structure, where more voices could be heard.

This focus on diversity in ownership came about thanks to the efforts of groups like Females United for Action (FUFA) and many others. FUFA is a Chicago-based organization of young women and girls dedicated to transformation through popular education and direct action organizing. FUFA stepped into the media justice realm in 2006, when its youth leaders launched a campaign to stop a local radio station

from advertising via a billboard series that essentially equated the backsides of a row of women in skin-tight shorts to radio “pegaditas,” or “hits”—a play on words that the youth did not appreciate. Realizing the problem was much larger than one media outlet, FUFA leaders went on to develop a survey of youth opinions on the media, a photo exhibit and a series of “Media Justice 101” trainings—all with the goal of building a base of young people who know how to critique the media and aim to change it.

So when the FCC came to town for hearings on media consolidation, it was natural that FUFA board member Alexandra (Allie) Pates would testify. But when this 14-year-old African-American girl stood up, many others in the room were surprised. Allie

spoke in stark terms about the way the mass media portrays people like her, and how it doesn't fit with the reality of her own life. “I have goals and a plan to achieve them,” she said. “I want to be a lawyer. But because of the media, you would just assume stereotypes about me and not want to hear what I have to say. I think if you changed the news, and made it so that there were more people of color or more women owning more media, there would be more diversity on TV.”

After her testimony, members of the press literally followed Allie out of the room. She was featured on the TV news and mentioned in many news stories. Message delivered.

—Isobel White

THE ART OF THE OP ED

By Jeff Gillenkirk

OP EDs can be an integral part of your campaign to sway public opinion and change the frame and perception of your issue. Media policy advocates face a special challenge in publishing their work in the corporate press, however, as it predictably will be resistant to criticism and calls for change. There are ways to make this work, above and beyond the basics of effective Op Ed writing and placement. But first, some basics!

Why an Op Ed?

The Op Ed page of daily newspapers is an accessible space to showcase your organization and summarize your message. This page is read by major decision-makers—businesspeople, politicians and their staffs, CEOs, heads of NGOs and scholars, as well as involved citizens who are potential advocates of your cause.

An effective Op Ed can be parlayed into appearances on radio and television talk shows, and in some cases attract the attention of book agents, television producers and policy makers. Your successful Op Ed can inject you and your organization into the middle of a local, regional or even national debate—or better yet, start one. It is a timely and durable document that you can reproduce for funders, direct mail campaigns, public officials and other decision makers. And by appearing in a mainstream publication rather than just on your own Web site or blog, you have a better chance of spreading your Op Ed across the Internet.

You won't be preaching to the choir in an Op Ed piece. Use your most convincing arguments, present solutions and combine passion with respect.

The Keys to an Effective Op Ed

The basic principles of putting your message into play on the Op Ed pages of a newspaper or magazine can be summarized in three steps.

1. Good Writing. Being right is not enough. Your Op Ed has to be clear, concise and compelling in order to connect with people who don't yet see your issue from your perspective, or to motivate people who do. People read newspapers quickly. You need to grab readers at the outset with an engaging opening paragraph that helps them understand the impact of your issue on their lives.

Avoid jargon and acronyms. Write in the active voice with strong verbs, colorful images, interesting anecdotes and personal stories that illustrate the issue in human terms. Structure your Op Ed so that it leads to a solution: Problem-Discussion-Solution (i.e., "call to action") is the classic structure.

Be cognizant of your audience and the fact that most people will not know your issue. For the most part, you are talking to regular folks, not your familiar base of loyal supporters. Passion and controversy are welcome, but write in a reasonable and respectful tone.

2. Good Timing. Issues often appear and disappear in daily newspapers in a matter of days. That means that you and your organization must be able to produce an Op Ed within days—not weeks. Use hooks that tie your Op Ed to news of the time—an ongoing debate over your issue, a Congressional investigation, FCC announcement, upcoming milestone (death or birth of a community news outlet in your city), anniversary (major disaster in which news coverage was lacking) or major new study. These hooks will help you insert your issue into the news cycle.

The Op Ed pages are a newspaper's most influential section. They generate the most mail, and they consider what to do about the news—rather than just reporting it.



Shamelessly exploit anything happening in the news, even popular culture. (I once tied *American Idol* to Hunger Awareness Day, as Simon Cowell had just toured a Los Angeles food bank and admitted he didn't know that so many people were hungry in America.) Once you decide on a hook, write the Op Ed and get sign-off within a two- to three-day time frame, even faster if possible. For news-sensitive issues, the longer you take, the less likely an editor is to run your Op Ed.

3. Good Contacts. Chances are you are one degree of separation from an editor at your local paper. Tap your social network to find out. Use your in-house resources, leverage your staff, allies, Board of Advisors and Board of Directors to identify any contacts with editors. Use a celebrity signer to break in to a paper—an actor, athlete, author or national political figure who supports your issue (local elected officials may not be of help, as politicians seeking publicity are in no short supply). Find the names of editors on the paper's Op Ed page or Web site.

Do a pre-submittal pitch: Where possible, have the “author” of the Op Ed (i.e., whoever is to be the signer, even if you wrote it, such as your E.D., Board Member or celebrity) call the Op Ed page editor directly to quickly describe the column idea and the news hook. Editors like to speak “equal to equal” and are more likely to be receptive if they get queried by an executive director than a communications person.

If you don't get a response to your query, go ahead and craft the Op Ed. Submit it according to the guidelines published on the paper's Op Ed page or Web site. Follow up with a call to the Op Ed editor or his/her assistant 24 to 36 hours after submission, inquiring whether they received the submission and briefly reiterate why the article is timely, compelling and important. Again, have the “author” make the call when possible. If you don't get a response to your submission or your query within two to three days, assume that it's dead and submit elsewhere.

The Challenge for Media Advocates.

Placing an Op Ed calling for the reform of mainstream corporate media presents special challenges. Journalists and editors know who signs their paychecks, and in most cases today that is someone working for a major conglomerate such as Hearst, Gannett, Disney or Fox. Think strategically: Would you publish an article in your organization's newsletter critical of your way of doing business? You may want to seek other outlets for your argument—-independent weekly newspapers in your area; journalism reviews like *CJR*; semi-national newspapers like *Christian Science Monitor*; or progressive publications like *The Nation*, *In These Times*, *Mother Jones* or *The Progressive*.

It's not impossible, however, to crack the Op Ed pages of corporate publications. Many journalists and editors still pride themselves in being independent of corporate influence and practitioners of a craft devoted to finding the truth.

One way to get published is to offer constructive criticism. Think about pointing out measures they can take to conform to FCC regulations or ways they can improve coverage, including reaching other communities, expanding readership and boosting civic pride. Keep your criticism respectful and constructive (“we're all in this because we value the media's role in society”). Cultivate a relationship with the Op Ed editor and pitch your criticism as an important argument about the future of journalism. Offer to take one side of a “pro-and-con” argument about a key issue of consolidation, coverage or community. Appeal to their pride of profession by referencing guidelines published by professional journalism societies and asking that their newspaper live up to them.

Finally, try to find an issue that sheds negative light on a competing conglomerate. Some aspect of media consolidation that benefits Fox may be one that Disney or Hearst is willing to oppose. Take your openings where you can!

You only have a two to three day window before current news becomes old news, so remember to follow your Op Ed submission with a pitch call.

A former speechwriter for New York Governor Mario Cuomo, Jeff Gillenkirk has composed and/or placed Op Eds in the Los Angeles Times, New York Times and Washington Post, among other outlets. He lives in San Francisco and provides strategic media consulting to nonprofit organizations through his firm, Your Message Media.

This bold initiative for a digital public works project ran in the Forum section of the San Francisco Chronicle on April 11, 2008. Helen De Michiel honed her Op Ed skills through SPIN's Op Ed writing and pitching seminars.

—Jeff Gillenkirk

IT'S TIME FOR A DIGITAL NEW DEAL

by Helen De Michiel

① *Strong lead: Like all good writing, your Op Ed needs to grab the reader's attention immediately. This Op Ed capitalizes on strong interest in the historic 2008 presidential primary campaigns and the rising number of young participants.*

② *Frame your issue quickly: De Michiel uses powerful, declarative language to effectively frame her issue, linking the aspirations of a passionate new generation to a nation in need.*

③ *State the problem: The author uses precise, dramatic examples to illustrate the problems she is setting out to resolve via an upgraded digital infrastructure and expansion of our democratic commons.*

④ *Discuss the issue in engaging terms: De Michiel provides an inspiring portrayal of the new millennial generation, using accessible, upbeat language. Rather than giving a list of policy points, she illustrates the benefits of her proposal by showing its impact on real people.*

① **WHEN MORE** than three million voters under age 30 turned out for recent caucuses and primaries, they staked a claim as a major force shaping this historic presidential election. Leaving college with an average \$20,000 debt in a recession economy, and entering a job market with fewer opportunities to earn a decent living, energized young Americans are yearning to help solve America's current calamities, address the mounting issues of income disparity and contribute to the health and well being of their communities.

② While enhanced national public service is part of the remaining candidates' campaign platforms, this is a singular moment in which to demand a much larger and bolder vision to propel all Americans, across generations, fully into the 21st century. It's time for a Digital New Deal.

③ Even though we inhabit a technologically saturated environment, America is falling behind in its capacity as a technological world leader. With only 53% broadband penetration, America now ranks 24th among industrialized nations—well below countries as diverse as China, Iceland and Canada. South Korea leads the world in broadband penetration, with 90% of households. This deficiency seriously affects our competitiveness in the global new economy and compromises our ability to keep pace with cyber-terrorism and other Internet hijinks.

Our next president can help reconstruct America's fragmented and relatively weak public communications infrastructure by using the most effective tool our youth wield—the power and depth of their digital fluency.

④ This eager, highly knowledgeable, connected and multitasking first generation of digital natives—"millennials" coming of age now who have used computers and the Internet since childhood—can be put to work in a WPA-inspired Digital New Deal to build out a networked national public commons that bolsters our international competitiveness.

Free of commercial data-mining and ultra-marketing of social networks like MySpace and Facebook, this new online public sphere would evolve into a robust multitude of open channels and spaces where people could safely share ideas, experiment with innovative design and debate issues and policies. The talents and organizing skills of the millennial generation, whose numbers now exceed their boomer parents, can be harnessed to connect citizens across online communities, and amplify America's independent media voices and visions globally. As a benefit, these Digital New Deal-makers will earn a living wage, be able to retire college debt and develop a lifelong commitment to the public good.

5 What will this work look like? Youth-driven teams will design tools, social networks and online environments that bolster and stimulate community-building and citizen participation. They would work with IT specialists to democratize the next generation of broadband access. And they can creatively partner with nonprofits, public schools and communities to build technological and networking capacity that will help us address challenges such as climate change, lack of healthcare and economic hardship.

The Digital New Deal will also foster a much-needed intergenerational knowledge exchange. Professional development goes both ways—young people showing their elders how to take advantage of Web 2.0, while public sector leaders and educators pass on the experience and wisdom they have gained working as organization builders. The expertise and enthusiasm of millennials and boomers are complementary, and can transform America's public communications sphere if we make this knowledge exchange a priority.

6 When Franklin D. Roosevelt put millions of Americans to work designing, building and repairing our country's roads, parks, buildings and schools, they were beautifully constructed for generations to use and enjoy. The construction of a widely accessible broadband digital network now ranks as equally important with that of President Roosevelt's public works infrastructure expansion in the last century.

Like other moments in American history when far-reaching public works initiatives were implemented, there will be cynicism and disdain along with relentless fear mongering to bring down this "activist" government program. But the benefits of a Digital New Deal are vast and cannot be underestimated.

7 Creative potential will be unleashed through new media and social networking pathways in ways we have never experienced, influencing where we live and how we work. Young people will be able to acquire entrepreneurial and leadership skills needed for a 21st-century workforce, and the public sector will be recharged and better prepared to handle problems of our time.

As the economy falters and technological innovation slows, the Digital New Deal can translate into trillions of dollars for a US economy wired for the online demands of the 21st century. It will create new skill sets and jobs for people who are now struggling, and bring new participants into the information economy. Without a large-scale public sector agenda, private enterprise will simply not provide this on their own.

8 Imagine after the 2008 election, a swarm of arts and culture leaders, public interest and policy advocates, energetic young software developers, philanthropists, media reformers and forward-thinking politicians banding together in a broad coalition to construct this Digital New Deal. How this investment in our future would be implemented—including public and private partnerships—is a debate well worth having.

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5 *Stay on message: Every point in your Op Ed should circle back to the main message. To strengthen her case for a Digital New Deal, De Michiel continues to use concrete language, free of industry jargon, to paint a portrait of the kinds of solutions she's proposing.*

6 *Marshal support: De Michiel links her vision of a Digital New Deal to the founder of the original New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and builds the case for meeting today's formidable economic challenges with a public works program tailor-made to meet contemporary needs.*

7 *Win-win solutions: It strengthens your appeal to propose a solution that impacts more than your own cause or subculture. Here the benefits of the Digital New Deal are shown to help today's young people and society in general. Who can argue with a helpful vision like that?*

8 *Call to action: The classic Op Ed structure of Problem-Discussion-Solution is successfully concluded as De Michiel makes an impassioned call for a broad coalition of reformers to help solve the many problems of our time.*