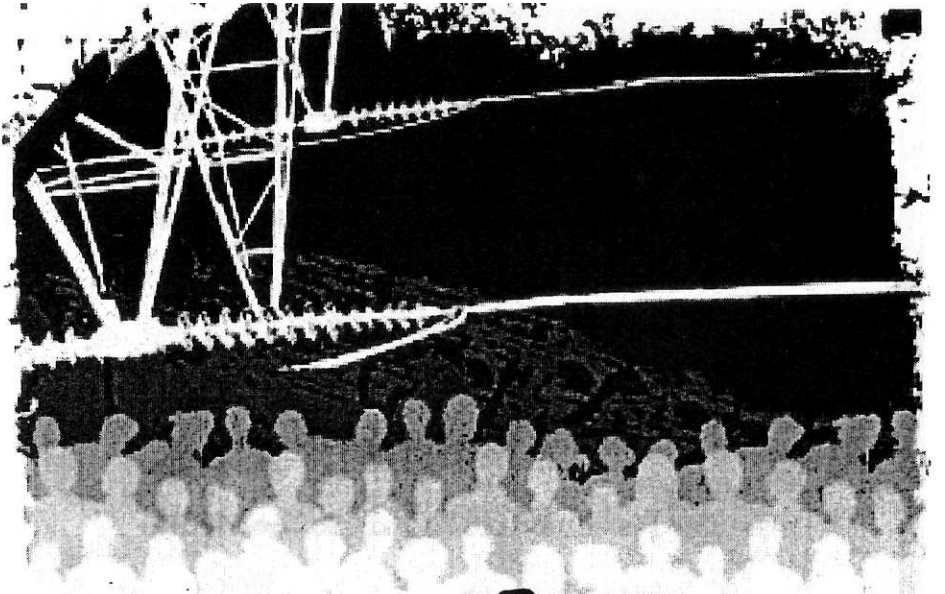


MEDIA:
A "HOW TO" GUIDE FOR ACTIVISTS

Despite the innumerable problems with the media system in the United States, anyone doing social change work will likely either need to or be required to interact with the media in some capacity. The following recipe will help make interacting with the media easier.

Ingredients:

* Something to Say
* Computer with Internet Access
* Telephone
* Person or Persons Able to Talk to the Media

First, begin by choosing what it is that you are going to communicate to the media. Are you going to tell them about an upcoming protest? Do you want to issue a statement on a particular injustice (there are so many) in the world? Do you want to use the media as a tool to impact the target of your protest or illuminate your issue?



Choosing why you need to or what can be gained from talking to the media is an important task and should not be taken lightly. All too often participants in social justice movements take the need for compromising with the corporate media as a given rather than considering the effectiveness of communicating with the media. For example, we are generally content with garnering some press

attention-regardless of the quality-rather than receiving "good" press.

Of course, there is no one definition of "good" press, and often times with social justice work, communicating with the corporate media is difficult because it is somewhat of an antithesis to the work that we are doing. The corporate media system is dominated by a few giant corporations that control most of the media that we see and consume and consequently it has a tremendous amount of power to shape how people perceive our work. Beyond that, a convincing argument can easily be made that the corporate media has a vested interest in not reporting on social justice movements because it is a benefactor of the status quo.

That said, there are times in which it makes sense to communicate with the media. ACTIVATE (Grand Rapids SDS) has had reasonable success communicating with the media when we have protests, provided that we think about what we are going to say in advance and what we can gain by talking to the media.

So now, on to the (vegan) meat of this recipe:

* Press Releases
* Follow-Up Calls
* Communicating with the Media
* Evaluating Coverage

PRESS RELEASES:

If you want to have the most minimal amount of success with the media–simply getting your issue in the media–it is essential that you send out a press release, preferably two weeks in advance. Press releases follow a standardized format (see below) and contain a contact for the person sending them out.

The skeleton format for a press release is:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:
< insert contact person >
Phone: < phone >
Email: < email >
Web: < web site (if there is one) >

HEADLINE: GROUP TO STOP THE IRAQ WAR

ACTIVATE (Grand Rapids SDS) is holding a protest on Tuesday, November 30 at 6:00am at Representative Vern Ehlers office to stop the Iraq War. The group will demand–and show through their actions–that Ehlers must immediately vote to stop the war.

<< GENERAL BACKGROUND PARAGRAPH >>

<< GENERAL BACKGROUND PARAGRAPH #2 >>

ACTIVATE (Grand Rapids SDS) is an antiwar group that has been organizing to stop the US

occupation of Iraq since 2006. We organize through community building and direct action.

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Now that we have the general ingredients for a press release, we need to throw in the remainder and stir.

First, select a contact person. This person can either give their real name or make up a name, but it is essential that they know what name they are using (we once had an embarrassing situation with a member press contact forgetting that they were going by "Dorthy Day"). This person should be available by email and phone, most often from the hours of 9am to 5am. For that reason, a cell phone can be particularly helpful.

ADVANCED TIP: We rotate our press contacts to prevent people from becoming media celebrities, to prevent the media from choosing "leaders," and to provide equal representation for the genders in our group.

Next, chose a headline for your event. Try to write something exciting and to the point, but don't stress out about it. We have generally had success by simply stating what it is we are doing. For example, we probably have sent (or would send) out press releases titled "Group to Demand End to the Occupation of Iraq."

The first paragraph of your press release is critical. You need to explain that "who, what, where, and

when" that you may have heard of in any high school or college discussion of journalism. Tell what is happening, who is doing it, where it is happening, and when. You can generally do this in one sentence, followed by a brief sentence that explains the "what." The "what" sentence does not need to be terrible complex; this can be explained in the next paragraph (see the example).



After the first paragraph-you guessed it-you need to write a second paragraph. This shouldbe a background paragraph that explains why you are doing something. Include the minimal amount of information necessary to get someone interested, keeping in mind that you should keep the press release to one page.

A third paragraph can be included-space permitting-for additional background information. Again, this paragraph should be used to pique the interest of a reporter.

The final paragraph should be a brief description of who it is that is doing the event and their history. If you are part of an organized group, it is good to give your name, how long you have been around, and what you do primarily. Keep it short!

After writing-and proofreading-your press release, you will need to send it out. While you can do it by fax, these days email is often easier and we haven't noticed a difference in terms of generating responses from the media.

To get a list of contacts for use in the West Michigan media market, visit:

http://www.mediamouse.org/griid/mediadirectory.php

If you are outside of West Michigan, you can get the emails for reporters and editors from the websites of local television, radio, and print media outlets. We generally send our press releases to the "News Directors" at television and radio outlets and the editors at newspapers. If you are able to identify the "beats"-or areas-that reporters cover, you can also send it to individual reporters.

ADVANCED TIP: Eventually, you will develop contacts with the media and might have a reporter or two that report on your group's activities regularly. Press releases should always be sent to those contacts.

After getting the list of emails, send the press release out. We do it two weeks in advance and then a week

in advance.

FOLLOW-UP CALLS

In reading various activist-oriented guides about using the media, you might have seen talk about having creative actions or good visuals for the media. While those might be good for tactical reasons, it generally is not necessary to have a "gimmick" that the media will be drawn to. Instead, we rely on "follow-up" calls.

Despite their name–which in some ways inspires dread–they are pretty simple. All you need to do is call the "News Directors" and editors that you sent your press release to in order to see if they got it. Simply tell them your name and that you sent a press release (explain what it is about BRIEFLY) and ask if they got it. If they say "no," ask for their email address and send it again. If they say "yes," try to get a commitment from them to come out. In our experience, they will be evasive and hesitant to commit, but it is important to ask and make it clear that you are expecting them to come out. It might be appropriate–and you will have to base it on how the interaction is going–to remind them again why they won't want to miss their chance to report on the event or issue.



COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA

Communicating with the media—despite all the stigma

that is sometimes associated with it–is really fairly easy, provided that you know what you are going to say. We generally chose one to three points related to what we are doing and stick with those. If you are interviewed, run through those points–it generally helps assure that at least one of your pre-determined points make it into the story. If you mess up–and this isn't to pressure you–and ramble, they will use the most incoherent thing that you say. Stay on topic, and stay focused. Moreover, don't worry about how you look or playing "games," what will impress them is knowledge of the topic.

We have also found that it is entirely unnecessary to play any of the "games" that the media sometimes wants to play. You do not need to stage shots, act in weird ways to get "good visuals," or do any of the stuff that they sometimes ask you to do. It is always a good idea to think about how you can control the media and set the terms as much as possible. One way that this can be done is knowing what you are going to say and sticking to those points–regardless of what they ask (questions about how do you "feel" about an issue or about whether or not you think what you are doing will really make a difference can be particularly dangerous). Another way to help control the media is to think about the visuals in a shot. If they are going to interview you at a protest, use the crowd as a back drop–don't let them isolate you. Similarly, you might want to consider positioning a sign or banner behind you so that a slogan conveys an additional message.

Finally, it helps to be proactive in dealing with the media. If they show up, have your press person approach

them immediately. Help them get the interview they are looking for, and do so quickly. If you don't, you can be sure they will start interviewing random people with a goal-perhaps unstated-of finding the most outlandishly dressed or most incoherent person in the crowd (or worse, the one pesky person demonstrating against you).

ADVANCED TIP: You can assemble "press packets" that contain background information about your issue, a copy of the press release, a copy of any handouts being distributed at the event, and history of your group. While we have not seen any evidence of these being used by reporters covering our group, they could potentially be useful and generally do not take much time to prepare. They do also give off a certain "air" of responsibility and respectability.

EVALUATING COVERAGE

If you receive media coverage, watch it, listen to it, or read it. Then, talk about it as a group-what was good in it, what was bad, and what could be done better in the future. This is a critical step that is often forgotten.

A FINAL NOTE ON ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION WITH THE MEDIA:

Finally, there may be a time when you wish to have a one-way communication with the media. Perhaps you did a banner drop or some type of action that you do not want to be associated with your group. While explaining how to do this is beyond the scope of this guide, be smart-don't call from your phone,

don't email things from your computer (or one on which you have authenticated to logon [for example, a library computer or one at your school]), and use a public fax machine (pay with cash) where there is no surveillance. Think seriously about how you wish to do this and research elsewhere for more ideas.

Now that you have read this guide, you will be cooking up delicious stories in the media that get your message amplified.

ACTIVATE
GRAND RAPIDS SDS
WWW.ACTIVATEGR.ORG

