

While written by an activist whose primary experience of the media is in the United Kingdom, (reflected in the examples used), the skills and approaches covered in this piece are relevant to a much wider context.

Media and your campaign

Media liaison has been central to many nonviolent struggles. The anti-colonial movement in India made sure the cameras were on Gandhi as he scooped up salt from the Indian Ocean. Anti-apartheid activists in South Africa timed their actions with an eye on the news cycle in countries they wanted to influence. Mubarak's opponents in Egypt ensured that the violence of his forces was filmed and broadcast around the world.

Engaging with the media does not mean accepting their priorities. It is possible to oppose the unaccountable power held by many media outlets while also using the media to promote our messages (in the same way that you can work with a politician who backs your cause without accepting the existing political system).

Media engagement must not be the preserve of professionals serving the status quo. The term 'Grassroots PR' refers to activists, community groups and individuals engaging with the media to promote their own concerns. We can engage with the media without compromising our integrity. 'Radicalism' and 'effectiveness' are not necessarily opposites.

A crucial distinction

The rise of social media has led many people to distinguish between the internet and 'traditional' media. However, there is a more important distinction to be made.

There is media that we produce ourselves - whether websites and tweets or leaflets and newsletters. In contrast, there is media produced by others - including news websites, newspapers, radio and television.

Media engagement is about getting our message across through media that others produce. This involves understanding how the media works.

Think media

Effective campaigning often means making media engagement a priority. If you plan an action and only then think about how to interest the media, you may have already chosen a date or venue that is going to make getting media coverage harder than it needs to be. This won't happen if you put media at the centre of your planning. This doesn't mean that media coverage should trump all other concerns, but it should not be afterthought.

Choose the right media

Who are you trying to influence? The most prominent media are not always the most important. Business leaders may be frightened of negative coverage in the financial press, in case it affects their share price. If you want to expose a politician, they may be more concerned about coverage in the local papers in their constituency than what's said in the national media.

A group of students and staff at University College London (UCL) realised the importance of choosing the right media when they called for their college to divest from the arms industry. UCL's Provost was sensitive about his media profile, particularly in education media. Coverage of the issue in publications such as the Times Higher Education supplement was key to the success of the campaign and UCL's decision to ditch its arms shares.

At the same time, don't pass up other opportunities to influence public opinion. Don't forget radio phone-ins and newspaper letters pages. In 2014, campaigners knitted a seven-mile scarf to stretch between the two sites of the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) in Berkshire. The group behind the plan, Action AWE, secured coverage in a knitting magazine - thus taking the anti-nuclear message to people who may be unfamiliar with it.

Making news

Something is only news if it is new. Opinions are not news - but you can make them news. When the University of London Union campaigned on Fairtrade, they could not make headlines simply by repeating its benefits. By conducting a survey that showed London students were among Britain's most enthusiastic Fairtrade buyers, they made a good news story.

Nonetheless, dealing with the media's ideas of what's newsworthy can be frustrating. Despite emphasising novelty, journalists often like to develop new angles on existing stories rather than cover something totally new.

It can therefore be helpful to relate your story to something already in the news. In 2011, the Jubilee Debt Campaign publicised the fact that the UK government was cancelling debt from countries that would never repay it - and then counting the sum concerned as expenditure on aid. In promoting this story in the Financial Times, the Campaign built on debates about the aid budget that had been prominent in the media at the time.

Before promoting any piece of news ask yourself three questions:

- Is it new?
- Is it clear?
- Is it relevant to the audience (such as a local story for a local paper)?

Have a clear message

Decide what you are calling for and keep repeating it clearly and concisely. Don't dilute strong arguments by adding weak ones. Don't let opponents or interviewers lead you off on tangents.

Relate your cause to everyday concerns. For example, you can make clear that climate change influences all our lives - and the poorest the most. Emphasise the difference that human rights make to every person. Point out that the biggest difference in society is between the richest and the rest - so the poorest and those in the middle can make common cause.

You're not simply a group of 'campaigners' or 'activists'. Use words that people will identify with. You may be a group of 'local residents', 'women', 'tenants', 'unemployed people' or 'students', among others.

A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic. Stories tend to be more memorable than facts and figures. If campaigning against a government policy, try to provide a story of someone whom the policy has harmed. The more people who identify with this individual, the more real the issue becomes to them.

Communicate with journalists

It sounds obvious but is often overlooked! You can issue a press release (also known as a news release) when you act or respond to events. Press releases are sent by email to a number of journalists at once. You can usually find journalists' email addresses on the websites of the publications or channels they work for. You can even phone up the general contact number and ask for the email address of a particular journalist. If you're not used to press releases, you can find examples on the websites of campaigning groups, many of which upload all their releases.

The headline is vital - it is this that you will write in the subject line of the email. Journalists who receive dozens of releases each day will not open them all and your headline may make the difference. It should be no more than ten words and clearly state a piece of news, not just an opinion. Summarise the most newsworthy aspect of the story in the first paragraph, with more information afterwards. The release should be worded in the third person, except for opinions that appear as quotes from someone involved. You can find advice about writing press releases in the sources listed below.

However, don't rely on press releases alone. Phone around some of the journalists who have received it. You may have sent the release to hundreds of people, but you can pick out the most likely ones for phoning. Be ready to summarise the newsworthy aspect of the story in a sentence or two when they answer. You can slant your pitch according to the journalist: for local radio, emphasise the local aspect, for an environmental magazine, emphasise the environmental aspect, and so on.

Brace yourself for disappointments - most of the journalists you phone will not be interested. But the chances are that you will eventually find someone who wants to know more.

Go back to the same journalists every time you have a story, especially those who seemed interested earlier. If you're concise, reliable and give them good stories, they will soon be phoning you for comments. When this happens make sure that someone is available and that you keep a record of the journalist's contact details.

Remember that journalists need you as much as you need them. You're offering them something, not asking for a favour. A good relationship with a few journalists is worth a thousand press releases.

Right time, right place

If aiming for a weekly paper that goes to print on Tuesday afternoon, don't hold an event on Tuesday evening. Call them on Wednesday and they'll just be beginning to look round for ideas for next week's issue. In the same way, journalists at daily papers often have more time in the morning than the afternoon.

Be where journalists are, both literally and metaphorically. It's difficult to get journalists along to a protest outside a company's offices, but if you demonstrate outside the company's AGM, business correspondents may already be there. Contact them in advance and there's a good chance they'll come over to speak with you.

Social media – blurring the boundaries

Social media usually fall into the category of media that you produce, rather than media produced by others, but the boundaries are blurred. Twitter and Facebook work best if you use them for conversation rather than

one-sided announcements. If people respond to your tweets, be prepared to reply. Many corporations have never understood this. That's why campaigning groups such as Boycott Workfare have been able to use social media to bombard unethical companies with messages about their policies, visible to anyone visiting the companies' Facebook pages or Twitter feeds.

Many journalists use Twitter very frequently, meaning you can now tweet journalists directly when you're trying to draw their attention to a story. They may also mention an issue that they're working on and you can reply by making a connection with an aspect of your campaign. Of course, be careful not to do this too often to the same few journalists or they may stop listening.

Secrecy and direct action

It can be hard to interest the media in nonviolent direct action or civil disobedience, because of course you often have to keep things secret until the last minute. One possibility is to inform a journalist with whom you have built up a good relationship, on the understanding that they will keep it confidential but that once the action starts, they will be able to publish all the details before the rest of the media know them. This has its risks: it involves trusting not only the journalist but any editors they may be reporting to.

If you would rather not do this, you can be prepared to publicise your action to the media at the moment that it begins. Someone can have a press release ready to go, send it out once they get the word the action has begun and start making phone calls. By planning media engagement as carefully as other aspects of an action, its impact can be significantly increased.

The number of people involved in a protest rarely makes much difference to the coverage. Creativity and originality have a bigger impact. When UK Uncut began occupying tax-dodging shops in 2010, it was a creative tactic with an original message. They gained far more coverage than the more predictable anti-cuts marches. Now that occupying shops has become more common, it's getting harder to gain coverage through it. We need to keep on being creative!

Giving interviews

Being interviewed on radio or television, or by a newspaper, can be a great opportunity to have your message heard. It can also be nervewracking. But if you keep calm, talk clearly and remember your audience, radical ideas can sound not only reasonable but even obvious.

Many people listen to the radio or TV in the background while doing other things. In most cases, you will not have time to develop a detailed argument. Ask yourself: if the listeners or viewers remember only one thing, what do you want it to be? Make sure that this is the point you talk about most. This is particularly important if your interview is recorded rather than live: it will probably be clipped, so if you talk about lots of things, the clip may be about something that's peripheral to your message. Don't let the questions distract you, but connect the questions to your own concerns and keep bringing the conversation back to your main focus.

Keep going

Media liaison is hard work. Don't give up. The more you do, the more contacts you will acquire and the more coverage you will get. Keep your press releases and your phone calls regular and respond speedily to enquiries. It will all be worth it when you see the coverage making a difference to your campaigns.

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