

FAX COVER SHEET

Wednesday, October 23, 1996 09:26:02 AM

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Fax #: 1-215-387-1560,,,01

From:
Fax: 4 pages and a cover page.



Note:

George,

This a version of my article that will be
printed in FAIR's publication, Extra this Nov.

Peter Wirth

Mass Media - A Resource For Activists!

A few years ago, continuing 16 years of social and political activism, I started a media consulting business with the goal of helping progressive organizations get wider coverage on their issues. Much of my media work has been with a variety of social justice and labor organizations in upstate New York, conservative Republican country.

Having arranged hundreds of news interviews, editorial board meetings and talkshow appearances on a variety of issues relating to Central America, Cuba, Haiti, occupational safety and health and the Contract with America, I have often found that it is possible to work with journalists and get a more or less undiluted message out to the general public.

While corporate ownership of the media, increased concentration of ownership and shrinking news departments may be daunting, it is my experience that there are many more positive opportunities available to activists than we may realize. The following are some observations on the obstacles we place in our path and my experiences with journalists.

Accepting Marginal Status

In workshops I run as a media consultant, activists frequently express very understandable feelings about the media based on discouraging experiences: "Don't trust them"... "not on our side"... "scared to talk to them"... "massive indifference."

Publications aimed at activists may intensify this negativity, in part to explain their own mission to provide another vehicle. For example, a recent advertisement from *Z* magazine states, "Corporate sponsored media is not about truth, it's about money and control of the message and access to it."

Out of 51 recent articles in the *Nonviolent Activist*, only three mentioned the media as an outreach strategy, and only one article indicated that mainstream media actually ran stories on the activism discussed.

While negative comments about corporate media are understandable, the lack of success stories in activist publications fosters an attitude that ignores mainstream media as a resource for activists to utilize.

"Activists need to take some responsibility for getting our story out," says Pat Kipping, a 20 year social justice advocate and media education consultant in Canada. "We have to understand and engage with the workers and the processes of the media institutions. We need to use the same tactics and efforts of the big boys to get the ears and eyes of the media, only we need to be better, more creative."

Kipping argues that progressives do not have an expectation that main stream journalists are interested

- * Create an expectation that activists will take the initiative to get our stories into local newspapers, on radio and TV news and talk shows.
- * Develop relationships with reporters and become identified as sources for good stories.
- * Think about news from the perspective of people inside the newsroom.
- * Think visually and exploit "photo opportunities" to get your message across.

Writing Press Releases:

- * Learn what interests particular editors and slants your press releases accordingly.
- * Keep your press release non-rhetorical and concise - limited to one page if possible.
- * Make sure the press release includes the "who, what, when, where and why."
- * Put your hook in the first paragraph.
- * Give it an exciting, headline-like title.
- * Include the name and phone number of a contact person.
- * Address press releases by name to specific editors or reporters who cover your subject (Religion editors are often receptive to social justice oriented material.)
- * Always follow-up with a phone call to make sure your press release was actually received.

articles in the **New York Times** and **Boston Globe**.

She started her campaign by setting up a mock jail cell outside the Public Safety Building. This provided a great photo opportunity for newspapers and visuals for TV. As the story developed she feed material to reporters and formed professional relationships which helped tremendously as different aspects of the story broke.

Thinking like a reporter she knew that an upcoming Physicians for Human Rights report, which described a method of prisoner restraint as a form of torture, could provide a news peg for a front page metropolitan story. The resulting media coverage helped bring about changes in the way prisoners were handled.

Also, in Syracuse, NY we arranged over 40 news stories in our local, corporate owned media in a two month period based on an engineers visit to Cuba to deliver humanitarian supplies.

Suggestions for Activists

Activists can learn from these examples and affect news coverage in their own communities. Organizations that succeed in getting their voice into the mainstream media decide early in their campaigns that public opinion is important. With that in mind, they aggressively solicit news coverage at every opportunity.

They pitch fund-raising dinners, airport departure and arrivals, prison vigils etc. as news events. They capitalize on breaking national news stories from overseas by offering local news outlets eyewitness accounts from people who made solidarity visits. They initiate contact with talk show producers and editorial boards in a timely fashion, offering them local speakers on hot news topics.

In doing so, they prove that with the right skills, the media can be a powerful tool to help activists achieve their goals.

Activists should continue to analyze and critique corporate-owned media, to support alternative media, to fight for better access to public airwaves and encourage critical media literacy programs in schools. But we also need to learn traditional public relations skills and make it a priority to gain access to the mass media, where most people get their news of the world.

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Media Hints for Activists

- * Give activists a clear message that the mainstream media, with all its limitations, is a resource to get our message out.
- * Provide media training resources and workshops for your members. Develop a public relations plan for your different activities.

in our work and therefore do not place a priority on learning public relation skills and forming relationships with reporters. "We tend to accept marginal status for our ideas," she says. "We expect to be rejected and don't realize there are many people in the media who are open to our ideas."

Media critic Noam Chomsky agrees. "It makes sense to keep a realistic grasp of the factors that limit and distort the media product" he says, "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."

Activist Success Stories

In looking around the country I see examples that reinforce my belief that the mass media with all its limitations holds great potential for activists.

* The Cleveland Interreligious Task Force on Central America hosted a speaking tour on the School of the Americas, a U.S. military training facility for Latin American military personnel that includes the Interreligious Peace Project, a peace and justice project which operates throughout Carolina counties that are strongholds of the Ku Klux Klan and Moral Majority integrates media planning into their overall strategy. Their work has been featured in over 50 national articles, national wire service stories appeared in several hundred daily newspapers, national television stories aired on CNN and CBS Network News and over 600 radio broadcasts ran including stories on National Public Radio. This is in addition to coverage in their local media.

"We've got to be careful that we don't get so righteous in who we will work with and who we won't work with," says Jesse Wimberley, an organizer for the PPP. "You know you can take that sentiment a little to far. You can use (mass media) as a tool for organizing the same way the far right uses it as a tool for organizing."

Activists need to accept the fact that if we are trying to reach the general public that most people get their news from mainstream media, Wimberley says. Progressive publications, newsletters and periodicals, while very important reach limited audiences. "We have to get out of this purist mode that's unless its totally politically correct we shouldn't be messing with it," he says. "That's a very defeatist position to take. We end up talking to ourselves. We'd end up having all our stuff published in liberal magazines. We'd be preaching to the choir."

That's why PPP worked very hard to get a article in **Family Circle**, according to Wimberley. Who reads **Family Circle**? Middle class, low income women. So if we want to do a story about women finding their voices and using them to take a larger role in the economics of this economy both local, state and national - what better place to reach that set of people."

* Kathleen Rumpf, a Catholic Worker activist in Syracuse brought national media attention to a situation in our local county jail including coverage on **60 Minutes**, National Public Radio and