

WORKING WITH MAINSTREAM MEDIA: ARE ACTIVISTS MISSING THE BOAT?

BY PETER WIRTH

OVER THE PAST 15 YEARS I've worked with many social action groups in upstate New York. I had my share of events where no one from the media attended. We mailed our press releases on time, made follow-up calls—and still we struck out. We couldn't attract media attention no matter what we did. If you've ever called a press conference that no press attended, you know the feeling.

Fortunately, we persevered. We got coverage—finally—of one event and learned from it. Fifteen years and hundreds of news stories—on El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Haiti, occupational safety and health, organized labor, prison conditions and the Contract with America—later, many local activists now see the mainstream news media as a resource to affect public opinion on these issues. Two years ago I started a public relations business and now help progressive groups here and elsewhere learn how better to reach the media and get coverage for our issues.

'Don't trust the media?'

Activists work on many different issues: civil rights, anti-war organizing, environmental concerns, foreign and domestic policy, etc. In every case we have a message to take to the public. Yet a tremendous gulf exists between the importance of getting our message out and the methods that many groups use to do so; too many movement publications convey the message that activists can't work with the mainstream media, an attitude that appears to be common in the progressive community nationwide.

For examples, an ad for Roots, a quarterly about Haiti, says, "Let's face it. Nowadays, it's almost impossible to get basic news on Haiti from the mainstream media ..." An article in Haiti Reborn says, "Contrary to what is being reported

Peter Wirth is an activist turned public relations consultant. He is interested in working with grassroots organizations. You can reach him at GW Associates, 702 S. Beech, Syracuse, NY 13210 (315)476-3396.

in the mainstream media ..." An American Friends Service Committee article on prisons comments, "As for learning, the media portrays the legal system as if it's on our side ..." A Peace Brigades International mailing regarding Colombia refers to "rhetoric by popular media ..." The message in all of them is "Don't trust the media." And when I asked participants in a recent media training workshop about their attitudes/feelings in working with the media, they answered, "Don't trust them," "Not on our side," "Scared," "Feel inadequate," "Massive indifference."

Some of those criticisms are valid. But the mass media are neither as ideologically driven nor as monolithic as people think. If you know where the openings are, you can use them to your advantage. Delegations to the developing world, for instance, often provide sponsoring groups with opportunities for extensive local coverage in delegates' communities. The parochial nature of news makes those events good feature story material—and gives us the chance to educate the public about the effects of U.S. foreign policy in different parts of the world.

No success stories

Activist publications relate few media success stories. None of the articles on 14 projects, some of them education-related, in a regional AFSC newsletter mentioned using the mainstream media as a vehicle to convey the projects' messages; recent newsletters from Christian Peace Making Teams and Peace Brigades International/USA also failed to include media success stories or to suggest using the media as a strategy. And out of 51 articles in the NVA, only three mentioned use of the media as an outreach strategy, and in only one was there any indication that the media actually ran stories on the activity.

The absence of success stories helps perpetuate a myth that the corporate-owned media are inaccessible, which, coupled with negative comments on the mainstream media, has created an activist mindset that places a low priority on

MEDIA HINTS FOR ACTIVISTS

- Develop relationships with reporters and become identified as sources for good stories.
- Think visually and exploit "photo opportunities" to get your message across.
- Think about news from the perspective of the people inside the newsroom.
- Learn what interests particular editors and slant your press releases accordingly.
- Address press releases to specific editors or reporters—by name—who cover your subject (religion editors are often receptive to peace-oriented material).
- Keep your press releases concise—limited to one page if possible—and nonrhetorical.
- 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.
- Always follow up with a phone call.

targeting the mainstream media. This self-defeating mindset permeates many social change and advocacy organizations from the grassroots up to the national level.

This past June, for instance, the Baltimore Sun ran a hard-hitting series on CIA activities in Honduras that directly linked the CIA to training a Honduran military intelligence unit in torture techniques and documented how the State Department falsified reports to cover up the situation. A week later I spoke with a National Public Radio reporter who was writing a story on the new head of the CIA. I was surprised that she didn't mention the Baltimore Sun article; when I said something about it, she was interested and asked for a copy. No one from any of the national organizations working on Central

America had brought the story to her attention.

Who needs the press?

Lets face it—newspapers, radio and television are the sources people go to for their news of the world, the sources that shape their opinions. Yet when I look at the methods that organizations use for outreach, I have to conclude that the beliefs that characterize much activist media work—or lack of it—include the notions that:

- a small group of dedicated individuals can change society by their actions alone;
- public opinion is not important;
- we change the world one person at a time, so the focus of our work should be the individual;
- faithfulness to an issue and personal witness are more important than being effective;
- it's impossible to work with the corporate-owned media.

We do

Think about the tools we use for outreach. In most cases they consist of newsletters to members, leaflets to whomever will accept them, reports circulated to other activists, speaking engagements at church, school and civic groups—(or other like-minded organizations), conferences for activists, and videos and films that are usually marketed to other activists. In other words, we communicate primarily with small, self-selected audiences.

I've attended numerous presentations over the years. When I've asked the organizers if attempts were made to contact the media the answer was no. If a press release was sent out there was no bio included on the speaker, no follow-up calls to reporters—both of which are crucial. That's because many projects, whether they're vigils, demonstrations, peace walks or delegations to other countries, seem to focus more on the individual's personal witness than on conveying a message to the community. It is a rare organization that has a public-relations strategy designed to convey its message to the community through print media, radio and TV.

That's too bad, because, as the following stories indicate, the media are more accessible than many people realize.

In the spring of 1994, an engineer from Syracuse traveled to Cuba with a Pastors for Peace caravan. A local committee ar-

anged over 40 news interviews in a 10-week period including a 14-article newspaper series by a reporter who traveled in Cuba with the caravan.

That July, a six-person delegation from upstate New York visited Haitian refugees in the Dominican Republic. Thirty-six interviews were arranged, including articles in local and national newspapers, radio and television interviews—from 30-second soundbites to five-minute feature interviews—and talk show appearances, including one on a syndicated program that reached 125 stations.

In 1994 and 1995, Kathleen Rumph, a Catholic Worker activist in Syracuse, was able to bring national media attention to a situation in our local jail, including coverage on "60 Minutes" and National Public Radio and articles in the New York Times and Boston Globe. The attention she got brought about changes in the use on prisoners of a method of restraint that a doctor from Physicians for Human Rights had defined as torture.

More recently a local coalition arranged over a half dozen radio and television talk show appearances and a number of print articles on the effects of the

Contract with America on Central New Yorkers. Our local Representative to Congress wrote a letter to the editor of a Syracuse paper about "the beating" he was taking in the local media over the Contract with America.

The organizations sponsoring each project decided early on that affecting local public opinion was important to reach their goal and that the activist community, by itself, was not large enough to effect the policy changes they were seeking. With that in mind they aggressively solicited news coverage at every opportunity. They pitched fund-raising dinners, delegation training, airport departure and arrivals, prison vigils, etc., as news events. They capitalized on breaking national news stories about Haiti and Cuba by offering eyewitness accounts from people who had visited those countries and providing the perspective of local social service agencies on the Contract with America. They initiated contact with talk show producers in a timely fashion, offering them local speakers on hot news topics.

And they proved, in each instance, that

continued on page 22

Media—from page 17

with the right skills the media can be a powerful tool to help activists achieve their goals.

Media resources:

- *Living Media*, by GW Associates, 1994. This writer's own 60-minute how-to audiocassette tape; includes interviews with reporters and activists who successfully used the media. \$11.49; call (315) 476-3396.
- *Accessing the Media*, by the Chicago Video Project, 1994. 13-minute videotape with discussion guide; covers the basics; \$27.95. Call (312) 271-1030.
- *Media How-To Guidebook*, by Media Alliance, 1991. 100 pages; call (415) 546-6334.
- *Prime-Time Activism: Media Strategies for Organizing*, by Charlotte Ryan. South End Press, 1991. Essential primer for all grassroots activists. 295 pages, \$12.00; call (617) 266-0629. ■