

10 STEPS

to a hard-hitting ACTION MEDIA TEAM

The skills, resources & mindset for:

Communicating with the public

Talking to the press

Building a grassroots movement that kicks

butt on the streets and on air

"If those in charge of our society - politicians, corporate executives, and owners of press and television - can dominate our ideas, they will be secure in their power. They will not need soldiers patrolling the streets. We will control ourselves."

— Howard Zinn

This guide is intended to give a quick guide of how to coordinate media work for community/student/activist groups taking political action, particularly direct action and civil disobedience. The information is broadly applicable to any number of campaigns, but it was written in the context of fighting against the cuts, marketisation of education and public services and infringement on the right to protest. This guide goes beyond "how to give an interview and write a press release"- it takes a more holistic approach incorporating social media, doing media for actions and representing your group to the public. It is not comprehensive, but will hopefully give you a sense of direction and a structure within which you can be responsive, creative and confrontational.

The mainstream media is a powerful way of reaching people- we all know that. But its vast influence on public attention and opinion is predicated on vested interests, corporate power and profit-pulling. It's also based on fast, gripping and new stories, which doesn't prioritise in-depth debate and discussion, or even getting the facts straight. So it's important that we learn how to navigate the media while also being aware of its limitations.

It feels great to get a story in the paper, but engagement with the media does NOT mean choosing our tactics and messages based on what we think the media will respond positively to. Instead, the role of a media team is to take the actions and politics that the wider group decides on, and try to get them out into the mainstream media as accurately as possible. If we sacrifice principled politics, hard-hitting actions and the cohesion of the movement for some media coverage, we hurt the cause we're fighting for.

Okay- ten steps to setting up a kickass action-media team. Let's go.

1 Set up your team and your resources

If your group wants to engage with the media, you'll need a few people to devote time and effort to making it happen. A media team doesn't just exist when journalists are around- media work requires advance planning and follow up. Not everyone needs to be happy talking to journalists- there is plenty of work in writing press releases, coordinating social media, etc. Be aware of race, gender, class and other forms of privilege when selecting spokespeople- you don't want your group to be represented only by the people who are most confident in nominating themselves.

Some basic resources you will need are:

- A press list to send your press release to. Include national and local newsdesks, the desks of the issue you are campaigning on (eg education, health), journalists who are covering the issues you are campaigning about (browse the news to look them up, www.journalisted.com is a good resource for this). Compile the numbers of your top contacts (local news, the most relevant journos and newsdesks). A lot of press use generic formats for email addresses- like firstname.surname@guardian.co.uk and firstinitial.surname@independent.co.uk.
- An email account to send the PR from- use your group's email address, or set up a specific one for press.
- A phone number where journalists can reach you. It is generally a bad idea to use a personal phone- do you want to pick up the phone on a night out and find you're talking to the BBC? Get a cheap pay-as-you-go.
- A contact list for groups/networks/blogs in the movement and activist media.
- Our movement thrives on social media- and we need to rely on it when the mainstream media won't print our stories because it doesn't fit with their agendas. Set up your social media facilities through tools like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and a website or blog where you can keep people updated with news, photos, videos and your messages.

2 Press Releases

A press release is the way you communicate to the world of journalists. It is **not** a pamphlet- keep it simple, factual and free of jargon. For help, look at the press releases on the websites of groups like Greenpeace or Climate Camp.

Timings:

If you can, send a press release a bit over a week in advance, the day before, when the action is happening, *and* a wrap-up PR after the action.

- A lot of newsdesks have news-planning desks for future events- it's worth looking these up and sending them the advance PRs.
- The earlier in the day you send something in, the more likely it is to get in. A lot of journos go home around 5, but evening news is big for the broadcast media, as is morning news and lunchtime news.
- A lot of print journalists have meetings with their editors around 11am to discuss the next day's paper- send them a heads up beforehand.

Writing:

- Put the name of your group, email address and phone number at the top and bottom of the PR. Put your Twitter account as well, as a lot of journalists follow Twitter for real-time updates.
- Say if you can provide photos, and/or give a link where photos can be found.
- Have a snappy and short title (less than 8 words)- it needs to be clear and convey that this is a good story, using exciting words.
- Answer who, what, when, where and why in a few sentences. Make the language dynamic, but avoid melodrama and editorialising.
- At the end of the PR, you can include one or two quotations from participants, organisers, supporters. This is where you put your political views. These quotations can be re-workings of your key messages- they don't have to explain *what* you're doing, but *why* you are doing it. Most journos won't print more than a couple of sentences, so give them what you most want printed, and not more.
- Include "Notes to the Editors" at the end. This is useful background information, links to relevant news stories (to show that this is a hot topic) and citations for facts you have used in the PR (to show you're not making it up).
- The PR should be no more than one page, including notes.

Sending:

- Send the PR from a group email account rather than a personal one.
- Put the title of the PR in the subject heading.
- Put your press contacts list into the "Bcc" (Blind Carbon Copy) field, and the email address you are sending it from in the "To" field- that way it doesn't come up as a mass/spam email.

Follow Up:

- After you send a press release, ring your top press contacts- say "Hi, I'm (name) from (group), and I have a story for you. It's about (one sentence about action) could I send you the press release, or do you know who else I can send it to?"

3 Interviews

This is the most visible aspect of press work- and it's vital that you approach it with as much preparation as possible. Here's some pointers:

Key Messages are a few (2 or 3) succinct messages which are the main points your group wants to get across. They are the points you will return to again and again in your interviews. They should be simple, represent the shared political aims of your group, and punchy. A key message looks something like "cuts to public services will hurt ordinary people by increasing poverty and inequality, and devastating vital health, housing and educational services" or "the most vulnerable people and future generations are being made to pay for a crisis caused by corporations and the banks".

ABC- when giving an interview, you need to take control of the story and pro-actively get across your messages rather than just responding to the questions. A technique for doing this is called "ABC"- **Acknowledge** (the question), **Bridge** (from the question) to **Communicate** (your key messages). So if the interviewer asks you "*what's happening here?*" you don't just say "*we're having an occupation*"- you say "*we're having an occupation to **protest the tuition fees and cuts to public services that will hurt ordinary people by increasing inequality and poverty...etc***".

If you get asked "*Isn't it only fair that you pay for receiving an education- after all, people around the country are having to to tighten their belts!*" you can say: "*Education is a social good that should be publicly funded so that nobody is priced out of higher education. We are tightening our belts because **we are being made to shoulder the cost of a crisis caused by the corporations and the banks**, and that isn't fair.*"

Anticipating the difficult questions and practising your responses makes the difference between a good interview and a disastrous one. Before you do an interview, think of the difficult questions you are likely to get, and brainstorm the responses and bridges that you can use to move onto your messages. You can even create a document for all the spokespeople compiling these ideas.

Journalist: "I understand that you have come here to protest peacefully, but what about the violent minority intent on causing trouble?"

You: "...I've been at many of the protests, and the violent minority turned out to be the police. There is no justification for police brutality- we are fighting against the

destruction of our vital public services... [bridge]”

The **type of interview** will affect what kind of interview you give. A pre-recorded interview will often result in a 10-second sound-bite, so you need to be incredibly strict with sticking to your key messages. In a live interview, you can find different ways of phrasing your key messages, and the interview will feel less robotic.

There are more suggestions for useful bridging techniques in Step 10

Practice. Seriously.

4 Being democratic

Formulating key messages, sticking to them, and avoiding celebrity complexes.

Doing press work for a group is a big responsibility- you're representing the group's political common ground to the public, and they are trusting you to stick to a message they are comfortable with. If there is a breakdown in trust- intentional or not- this will have consequences for the group. Here are some tips on avoiding common pitfalls:

- The entire group should feed into the formulation of the key messages. Get a strong steer from the group about what issues they want to be focusing on.
- If there are issues which may be controversial (what do we say about the Labour Party), know what the group thinks.
- If you are asked a question in an interview about an issue that your group is divided on, or that you don't know what the group thinks about, do **not** just say what you think. Instead, use bridging techniques to move on to the messages your group agrees with: “that's a complex question, and raises a lot of important issues- the issues we are trying to raise today are...”
- **Practice** the difficult questions so you don't get caught off-guard!
- Try to rotate the individuals you use as spokespeople, so you don't just have the same old faces. For groups involved in civil disobedience, this is also important to minimise the chances of a spokesperson being singled out as a ringleader and targeted by the police and authorities.
- Using fake names is something that a lot of spokespeople for activist groups do. It separates the press work you do from you as an individual, so the focus remains on the issue rather than your background, facebook profile, or whatever. You are also less likely to be successfully targeted by the authorities.

5 Skillshare!

Sharing media skills is essential for reasons of democracy and security as outlined in step 4, but also for the practical reason that your media team cannot (and should not) monopolise talking to the press. The media like hearing the voices of “ordinary students” and may choose to bypass the media team. At a protest, journalists will grab whoever will talk to them to get the “word on the street”. This means that the more people who know how to talk to the media, the better. And the more people who know how to coordinate a media team, the more effective our actions will be, whether on a small, mass, local, national or global level.

Arrange media trainings to get new people skilled up. It can be tempting to let the most experienced people handle all the interviews, but everyone has to learn on the job. Buddy up with new volunteers so you can talk them through what you are doing and why, and always get interested people involved.

6 Swinging into Action

Coordinating media for a day of action or protest

Unlike politicians, grassroots groups usually get into the news for their actions rather than by making statements. That’s why it’s important to be prepared for press work when planning for an action. Below is a general outline of how a media team can function during an action. You can adjust this depending on size and security needs.

- Well before the day of the protest/action, your whole group should guide the media team on choosing key messages.
- Remember to send a press release about the action several days before, the day before, and when it happens. If it’s a covert action, don’t send out advance PRs- even embargoed PR’s are not secure!
- For an action that is large, unpredictable or involves several components, it can be useful to have an offsite media hub somewhere with fast internet, electricity and a bit of calm. Arrange this location in advance- try not to make it too public because the police have raided media spaces before. The main media phone will be offsite, press releases get sent out from offsite, and the offsite team will conduct ring-arounds, answer calls from journalists, give interviews over the phone or put the journalist in touch with the spokespeople on the action.

- Arrange a network of media-trained spokespeople who will be at the action (at various locations, if necessary). You will pass on interviews to them, and it is also their responsibility to check in with you throughout the action to keep you updated, so you know what info to put out in social media a PRs.
- The offsite team also maintains social media: Facebook, Twitter, your group's website/blog, and other such newfangled tools. Shift info from people on the action/protest onto the internet. Arrange for people on the ground to tweet with the right hashtags, put up photos and upload and live-stream video. (Twitpic, Qik and YouTube are good tools for this). SOCIAL MEDIA IS OFTEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA COVERAGE.
- If possible, coordinate with people taking photos and video so that you have access to hi-resolution images and video ASAP. A story with a good photo makes journalists and the public far more interested. *Do NOT distribute incriminating photos/videos - if people are recognizable in photos and they are doing something which is illegal, do not put the photo into the public sphere, or you are putting that person at risk*
- If you have capacity, monitor what kind of pick-up you are getting throughout the day. If there are mistakes in a story, call in and try to get them corrected. If there is a new development (eg the local MP goes on TV and condemns you), respond to it (eg send out a PR condemning them back).

Media from street-level: if you want to do media from a protest-

- A small computer with a long battery life like a netbook can be very useful. You can get internet in most places by buying a dongle- a device which connects to your USB drive and picks up the internet like an internet phone.
- Have a phone with full battery- you can even bring an extra battery.
- Have the phone numbers of groups like the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts and UK Uncut so that you can get in touch if necessary.
- Have phone numbers for your top press contacts.
- If you are arrested, the police will probably take your phones and computer and keep them as evidence for an indefinite period of time. So don't do media if you are expecting to get nicked (or give the kit to a friend beforehand.)

7 Wrapping up the Day of Action

- At the end of the day send out a PR summarising what happened that day. Respond to what the target of the actions, the police, MPs, etc have said

throughout the day. Online news and tabloids often work late hours, but a lot of journalists work 9-5, so try to get your PR in comfortably before 5.

- A day of non-stop media work is exhausting. If there are people who are willing to pick up the work for the evening and the following days, make sure they get the media phone and check the email account- sharing work load is part of keeping activism sustainable.
- Put together a summary of media pick-up highlights to share with the group (remember that people who have been at a demo all day won't know whether they made the news). This kind of info is good for morale, and is an important part of communication within your group.
- Make complaints to the Press Complaints Commission if necessary.

"Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper."

-George Orwell

8 Don't wait for the papers to call you- be proactive.

- Write comment pieces and letters to the editor to local and national news.
- Local media and student media is usually less overloaded with content than the nationals, and also more likely to be read by local people who can become active supporters, because they can get involved.
- Sometimes it is possible to arrange for features in the paper- if you think you might have an interesting angle on a topical issue (unreleased information, a human interest aspect, etc), get in touch with the features editor.
- Look up relevant publications- if you are campaigning on cuts to health services, you need to find out the national and local magazines, bulletins, groups, websites and news outlets that focus on health issues.

9 Don't trust the corporate media- be the media!

The inherent limitations in the corporate media mean that although we use it as a tool, we cannot rely on it as a means for getting our messages out. When it comes down to it, the powers we are fighting against have more media power than we do- some of them own the media, after all. Make sure you are:

- Communicating to other groups in the movement through your website, social media, meetings/gatherings/conferences and through existing networks. Various networks exist, and they should be helping groups communicate- some are: National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, UK Uncut, Education Activist Network, Coalition of Resistance.
- Producing your own media- news-sheets, email bulletins, zines.
- Use independent activist media to distribute and get news. Check out Occupulse, indymedia.org.uk, dissidentisland.org, reelnews.co.uk.

"Our job is to give people not what they want, but what we decide they ought to have."

– Richard Salent, Former President CBS News.

10 Build the movement

Make sure that you are including an “ask” in your media outreach- don’t just tell the public what you are doing, let them know how they can be a part of it. This may include mentioning your next action or meeting, urging everyone to get involved in the movement fighting fees and cuts, or even just telling people to check out your website for info on how to get involved. The media often focuses on the here-and-now, but you need to work around that.

The media work you do is not just about your local group or your upcoming event- you are part of a wider, diverse movement. It is vital that you avoid tricky questions that try to split the movement into “good protestors” and “bad protestors” (who do not always cooperate with the police, engage in civil disobedience or property damage).

There is an important space between condemning and condoning- you do not need to endorse something like breaking the law or breaking windows (what does your group think?), but you don’t need to condemn it either. Don’t let journalists con you into splitting the movement because it makes a better story- use bridging techniques like “I wasn’t there so I can’t comment on that, what I saw was that people are determined to stop the cuts...” or “that’s a really complex issue- what it makes clear is that people are really angry at what the government is doing...” or “if you want to talk about vandalism, let’s look at what the government is doing to vital public services, and the suffering this will cause to people across the country”.

Hopefully this guide will be useful to setting up and running a media team for your group. Learning how to deal with the media can be exciting and fun, and vastly expands your ability to get your message across.

Now, go forth and communicate!

More Resources

An Activists' Guide to Exploiting the Media - George Monbiot

<http://www.urban75.com/Action/media.html>

Database of Local Newspapers in every county

<http://www.nsdatabase.co.uk/>

People and Planet Press Resources - including draft Press Releases

<http://peopleandplanet.org/unis/gg/media>

Track down contact details for journalists and find out who is writing on what issue

<http://journalisted.com/>

Smartmeme's excellent press work resources and "Spokesperson Tips" guidesheet

<http://www.smartmeme.org/section.php?id=86>

The Media Trust's tips on getting a story in the news

<http://www.mediatrust.org/newswire/>

Urban 75's info for photographing and videoing protests

<http://www.urban75.org/photos/photographing-protests.html>

Press Complaints Commission Guidelines

<http://www.pcc.org.uk/complaints/makingacomplaint.html>

If you want to arrange a media training for your group, some activist groups might be able to send someone along. Try:

press@climatecamp.org.uk

oxford@seedsforchange.org.uk or lanaster@seedsforchange.org.uk

Or local groups near you who have experience with the media

"The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. . . The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."

-- Martin Luther King Jr.



This guide is copyleft for creative commons- feel free to share, distribute and update, as long as you are using it for grassroots agitation for social justice.