

Module 12



Be the Media

Help the media cover the People's right to oversee their own elections. Gather videotape, photographs, audio, and public records to buttress your case with the media. And become your own media – whether or not the media covers the most important issues, take it upon yourself to make sure the word gets out.

Guide to Being Your Own Free Press

Goals:

Help the media cover the issue by providing the kind of information they need, in the format they need, buttressed by the kind of evidence they need in order to persuade producers and editors.

At the same time, bring the message to as many people as you can yourself. Don't become dependent on someone else's editor to get your story out there.

Top 10 Publicity Blunders: A Reverse Tutorial on How to Get Media Coverage

Blunder # 10: Send a "News" Release That Isn't News

- Know the difference between a news piece and an opinion piece. Editors and producers want facts and a frame for why it's relevant. They aren't interested in your opinion.
- Delete adjectives. Substitute facts.
 - Don't: "VoteSolutionGroup, a dynamic and important citizens group."
 - Do: "VoteSolutionGroup, a local citizens group that focuses on elections issues"

- Learn how to write a strong lead sentence. Don't make journalists read all the way through your press release to get the point.
 - Skip the "Who What When Where Why" first sentence. Some fossil once taught this technique for press releases, but it went out with polyester suits.
 - Get to the point in the headline, then write a lead like a news story. Don't bore the reporter in your first sentence.
 - **Don't:** "On June 12, 2006, Tom Smith examined a voting machine in Sacramento Calif. to see if it could be hacked."
 - **Do:** "You've been hacked," a Sacramento County voting machine results report announced. The test was performed by XYZ citizen's group with the cooperation of local elections officials. (quote from an elections official, by name)

- Press release format:

Contact: (your name, your phone number, your e-mail, your organization)

HEADLINE

Subhead

CITY: date – Strong news-like lead sentence.

(Supporting paragraphs)

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- Faxed news release should fit on one page.
- Don't tease or expect reporters to call you for explanations ("But aren't reporters expected to edit the news release? Why should I do their work for them?") No. Can you say d e a d l i n e ? Put the information they need in the news release. Cite sources and provide links to government or public records to make your facts easy to verify.

Blunder # 9: Act like you're top banana. (You're just today's lunch.)

- These people can call their own shots with the media:
 - Prince William, heir to the throne of England
 - Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie
 - Osama bin Laden

- Don't make these mistakes:

"Well! This is the second information kit I sent to USA Today, at their request. If they lose this one, they'll just have to do without me."

(USA Today can do without you.)

"I think Good Morning America should pay my travel expenses if they want me."

"How much will magazines pay when they run my photograph?"

The media generally doesn't pay for the privilege of covering your story. Also, reputable journalists will never ask you to pay them.

Blunder #8: Forget How To Tell Time

- Learn how to count backwards.
 - Magazines: 3-4 month lead time
 - Calendar or Event section of newspaper: 2-3 week lead time
 - Community newspaper: 1-2 week lead time
 - Daily newspaper: 2-3 day lead time, except breaking news (6-12 hr, lead time).
 - Talk show television: May take 1-4 months to get on the show, with repeated contacts. When they decide they want you, it's often with very short notice.
 - Talk radio: 1 day to six week lead time
 - TV: 1-3 days lead time
 - On Election Day: TV news crews can often get there in less than an hour if you have a good breaking story

Blunder #7 Use News Angles That Aren't News

- Not a news angle: Fascinating you.
 - Do paparazzi follow you around? If not, don't make yourself the focus.
- Not a news angle: Your topic.
 - "Election reform" is not a news angle.
 - "Voting machine sleepovers in San Diego" is a news angle.
- Not a news angle: Voting machines are insecure
 - A better angle: Voting machine log shows three hours missing on Election Night
- Not a news angle: Buzz words and slogans.
 - "Election integrity expert recommends "three A's" -- Analyze, Audit, and develop Allies" is not a news angle.
 - A better angle: Develop a tie-in for current popular news stories. For example, while the news is reporting that candidates are registering to run for office, tie in with a related angle – like "5 steps candidates can take to ensure a fair election" and send a news release about it. Timing is everything: Ride the wave, don't try to create the wave.

Blunder #6: Do one-shot PR

- PR is cumulative.
- Get yourself in their Rolodex so they know who to call when a story breaks and they are on deadline. How do you do this? By developing a variety of solid news angles on your topic and putting your name/contact info at the top with a tag line like "Available for interviews on election topics".
- Do this on every press release and offer many different kinds of story angles, which you feed to the press over a period of time.

Blunder #5: After You Get a Reporter Interested, Become Unavailable

"Tell radio talk show hosts that I need 3 weeks notice and I can't do any shows between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. Eastern time, because I work."

Okay. If you are satisfied with one-tenth of the normal result for your PR efforts, go for it.

When called to do a show: *"I'll have to call you back after I check my schedule."*

Accept the booking on the spot. Bookers have a slot to fill. Whoever says Yes first usually gets it.

Blunder #4: Look For Love In All The Wrong Places

- Check your media matching IQ:

"I would like to have Dr. Laura Schlesinger interview me about my elections group because a lot of women listen to her show."

This is an advice show about moral issues. She doesn't interview people about election reform.

"Maybe she might do it just this once, if my story is really, really good? Because I really think her audience is perfect for me."

They aren't going to risk losing ratings or subscribers to cover something that doesn't match their format.

Annoying Dr. Laura's producers is not a good plan. May we suggest these targets instead: *All Things Politics* (a talk radio show featuring local and national political issues from laws to elections..) Or *Action Point* (an Air America show that has been running a series on election integrity.)

- Use the Internet, or go to the library and look at Bacon's Media Directory or Burrelle's to find media outlets that match your topic.

Blunder #3: Expect Press Coverage Without Sending Any Materials

"My local media isn't covering this story."

- Have you been sending effective press materials using strong story angles, with ties to current news topics and good story hooks?
- Have you made any phone calls? Phone calls don't replace news releases, but they can tell you if you've even got the right editor or if your hook is a dud. If you make calls, have a good press release ready to go and fax it or e-mail it as soon as they ask for it. Journalists are not going to permit you to dictate the news release on the phone, so have it ready to go and in the format (e-mail or fax) that they ask for.

Blunder #2: Just Get me on Oprah

Don't get hung up on a single media outlet. Repeat exposure is more important, anyway. And besides, Oprah doesn't cover this kind of issue. Don't expect her to revise the format of her show just because you think it's important. Do the legwork to get into media that is a better match first.

Blunder #1: Forget To Show Up For Your Own Press Coverage

- Did you know that talk show hosts share their guest recommendations at a private online site reserved only for radio hosts? If you no-show, you can be blackballed.
- Broadcast interviewers detest being left with dead air.

Tips for publicizing an event:

- Write a news release before contacting anyone in the media, because they will always ask you to send one to them. Always make sure that there is the name and phone number of at least one (preferably two or three) easily accessible contact person(s) who will be able to reply to media inquiries before, during and after the event.
- Most print and broadcast media these days can be found with a "Google" search on the web. If you prefer, there is a set of reference books in just about every public library called "Standard Rate & Data," which usually has a pretty up-to-date listing of every publication and broadcast outlet in every U.S. city along with the names and phone numbers of editors, news directors, etc. Some libraries have another good set of reference books called "Bacon's."
- After sending the news release (via email, snail-mail or fax), call the person to whom you sent the news release (or ask for the assignment editor or managing editor if you only were able to send the release to a generic news room number).
- Usually you can find out from a Google search which radio stations in an area have local newscasts and locally produced talk and public affairs programs. Offer to be a guest on one of their shows and/or offer to schedule a local voting integrity activist, area politician, etc. Sometimes they will allow phone interviews, but for local events they usually they prefer in-studio interviews.

- You might have to call a radio or TV station to find out who the public affairs director and talk show producers are. Quite often there will be at least one locally produced public affairs program on a National Public Radio outlet.
- No matter what type of broadcast outlet it is, always provide a concise fact sheet (about when and where the event will be) to both the producer and the interviewer as much in advance as possible – and always bring a fresh fact sheet on the day of the interview just in case they claim to have never gotten or misplaced it (or whatever). Usually that information will be placed on a TV station's screen toward the end of the interview, but unless you can actually see the info on the screen (or unless the interview brings it up himself or herself), make sure you mention the event. Interviews sometimes seem to be over in the blink of an eye, so make sure you mention the event if the interviewer hasn't already mentioned the topic.
- If you know about the event long enough in advance, you can write and send brief public service announcements (PSAs) and send them to local radio and cable TV stations. It doesn't matter whether they have a news/talk format.
- Make follow-up calls to the news media at least two days prior to the event. Then call the day before and day of the event (unless the media outlet's editor, etc. tells you not to) and schedule on-site interviews with keynote speakers, panelists, etc.
- Bring extra news releases (along with any other important literature) to give to media folks who come to the event. Don't overwhelm them with too many items, though, because they will have news deadlines to meet.
- If possible, write post-event news releases and accompany them with digital photos

Don't depend on the media: Become the media yourself

- Spread the evidence you find to every blog, listserv, forum you know and throughout your personal network.
- Talk about it at work and to people you meet everywhere.
- Learn to write an effective press release.
- Put messages on:
 - Yard signs
 - Car windows
 - Write them on duct tape and wear them
 - Print removeable stickers and stick them on things:
 - Bathroom door at the gas station.
 - On telephone poles in the dead of night
 - At bus stops
 - On the back of bus seats
 - Stick them into your junk mail and send it back via return mail
 - Slip them into menus at restaurants
 - Leave them in books at the bookstore

- Make magnetic signs for your car
- If you know a trucker, have them put a message in the window as they drive across the county.
- Make a patch and put it on the front of your baseball cap
- Carry a sign and stand in the window outside the Today Show

Show leadership

- Use your real name when you post on Internet message boards about election reform
- Stand up for what you believe even if you are told "It will never happen."

BE YOUR OWN HISTORIAN / DOCUMENTARY PRODUCER: Capture Events and People on Film

Get the hard evidence that can stand up in a court of law and preserve the historical truth behind the election reform movement.

- Document public meetings, elections, recounts, election officials, vendors, politicians and anything dealing with election reform is a piece of history that cannot be rewritten, if you have the truth of what occurred on film.
- Let's get as many citizens as possible get into the habit of documenting on film anything related to election reform because it will inspire others to action and will be a reservoir of truth that we can draw from in order to find the best solutions for election reform that will preserve our republic:
- Here's a succinct guide, written by a lawyer, that provides some excellent general guidance. Download it, print it out, and keep it with your camcorder:
www.krages.com/phoright.htm

General tips:

- Keep your camera's battery charged
- Keep extra blank tapes available
- The goal is to get public officials and vendors on record by asking the right questions and observing what they do.
- Show others what good public servants look like, and document the difficult ones.
- Especially for meetings, prepare ahead of time by writing questions designed to elicit definitive answers regarding voting procedures.
- Avoid over-general questions that lead to speeches, evasion and non-responsiveness.
- If you happen to capture something that has evidentiary value (which happens more often than you think), be prepared to execute a formal affidavit and/or testify, if needed.

- Throughout the Election Cycle, capture any part of:
 - Public meetings
 - Certification hearings
 - Testing
 - Ballot preparation
 - Election-related activities by third-party vendors
 - Meetings with vendors or public officials
 - Early voting
 - Election training
 - Pre-election equipment and materials transport and handling
 - Voting day activities
 - Vote Counting (all phases including videotaping chain of custody):
 - ✓ Depots and drop-off sites
 - ✓ Spot check audits
 - ✓ Absentee ballot processing
 - ✓ Mid-election and post-election equipment and materials transport and handling
 - Explanations of policies and procedures
 - Explanations of "glitches"
 - Post-election canvassing meetings
 - Obstructive behavior, intimidation tactics, evasive or non-responsive actions

Tips From a Film Producer:

- When shooting, keep any zooms and camera moves purposeful -- gratuitous zooming and "garden-hosing" makes the video hard to watch, and looks amateurish.
- Let the subject matter guide your moves. Need to see more detail? Zoom in.
- Need to include more of the environment? Zoom out.
- When in doubt, keep the zoom as wide as it will go -- this will also keep your images steadier and is more likely to catch action you'd miss when zoomed in. If you must be discreet (i.e. holding the camera casually without looking through it) keeping the zoom wide will increase your chances of catching the action.
- You'll probably be using your camera's (lousy) built-in microphone to capture audio, so if sound or words are important, stay as close to the subject as practicable under the circumstances.
- If you are forcibly discouraged from shooting video, put the lens cap on if you must, and keep the camcorder running to capture audio.
- Don't be confrontational, but whenever possible someone in the background should be ready to shoot any confrontations that may arise between you and anyone trying to prevent you from shooting. The more cameras on the scene the better.

- Learn how to make digital copies of your tapes -- never let the original tapes out of your hands. If you've captured incriminating evidence, keep your original tapes in a secure or non-obvious location.
- When you remove a recorded tape from the camcorder, be sure to write-protect the cassette immediately, to prevent its accidentally being recorded over. On Mini-DV tapes, there's a shutter on the back edge of the cassette that you slide OPEN. On 8mm/Hi-8 tapes, you slide the shutter CLOSED. On VHS tapes there's a plastic tab that you pry out and discard.
- Without fail, label each tape with the subject, the date, and your phone number, and indicate whether the tape is an original or a copy.
- If your tapes should get confiscated you may still be able to shoot low-quality MPEG video on your camcorder's memory card, if it has one (get the biggest card you can afford). This may be better than nothing.
- Get familiar with your camera and practice its use beforehand. In the heat of battle there will be little opportunity to read the manual! Too much trouble? Weigh the tradeoffs, then decide.

Questions to ask to "Be the Media":

- Are there any other locations besides this where election preparations or ballot handling or processing goes on?
- When is the next small election?
- Will there be absentee voting? Who will the ballot printer be? Where will they be processed for mailing? Sorting? Counting?
- Where is the central tabulator room? Are citizens allowed to watch the central tallying?
- Where are voting machines kept?
- What staff members touch your voting machines before, during and after elections?
- Does the vendor help with your elections? What are the names of the vendor support reps?

More resources: Democracy for America has produced an excellent online course to access the media: <http://tools.democracyforamerica.com/nightsschool/>

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Your Own Additions to the Be the Media Module

You can share your ideas by sending to crew@blackboxvoting.org



What worked well?

What new ideas did you come up with?

Was there anything that didn't work very well?
