



EC/UNFPA INITIATIVE FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN ASIA



# Dealing With Media

## *A Practical Guide*



ComNet co-ordinated by German Foundation  
for World Population (DSW)

**DSW**

RHI Practical Media Guide

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## I. Why Bother?

The functions of media are diverse, ranging from news, discussions, and information and education to raising awareness.

NGOs can have many different reasons to deal with media. Common goals are to:

- a. Enhance the visibility of your organisation and name recognition**
- b. Inform the public about your activities**
- c. Generate public support for your activities and organisation**
- d. Increase fundraising or membership**
- e. Stimulate discussion on the issues you are dealing with**

**ad.a.** In the long run the visibility of your organisation is one of the more important determining factors in the sustainability of your organisation. Donors and governments think twice before defunding an organisation that is well known and popular. If you are known it is easier to mobilise your supporters.

**ad.b.** Media is an effective way to reach your potential clients and their environment. An article about what you are doing can give potential clients an opportunity to start a conversation with their peers, parents or partners about your work.

**ad.c.** Public support for what you are doing does not come automatically. You will need public support at one point in time but you have to make friends before you need them. Media attention for your work is a good tool to do exactly that.

**ad.d.** Increasing membership and fundraising can be built upon positive media coverage. Very big membership organisations mostly use media to expand their membership successfully.

**ad.e.** The issues we are dealing with are issues that each and every individual in this world will have to deal with one day or another: sexuality, life and death, children, women. Individuals form their opinions on the basis of the opinions of their peers (family, friends) and, second in line, on what they see, hear and read in the media. If you do not help them to develop informed opinions, others will, but probably not the ones you would like to see.

## **2. Good Media Coverage Does Not Come Automatically: It Is Hard Work**

It is not true that individuals or organisations receive positive media coverage without working for it. Companies and politicians seem to know that better than NGOs.

Many of us tend to stick to our “core” business being service providing or developing IEC materials. Even more NGOs deal with media on an ad hoc basis, only to find out that they are helpless when attacked in any way.

Media work can be exhausting because it takes investments and commitments without having a lot of sound results at first. But look at organisations in your country that have a lot of positive media coverage; they most probably have a media strategy and a media plan, together with spokespersons, resources and people working on media contacts.

Investing in building up media contacts requires a consensus in your own organisation. A half day brainstorm session with the whole staff once a year is not only fun, it is also necessary to maintain the idea that media are important for your organisation. The work can be done by an appointed media person, even if he or she spends only a few hours a week on this. But it is the person who picks up the phone that needs to be aware of what to do when a journalist calls, it is the driver who has heard the most reactions to your mes-

sages on the radio and it is the director who got a phone call from the major who was irritated by what you said in the newspaper. Experts tend to find journalists not very interesting: they never know what really is going on and should better be avoided. Lots of great work and new ideas never make their way into the media, and to the general public due to this trend. But you do not have to like journalists and other media people to see that they are important tools to get the work done. Media work needs the commitment of all your colleagues.

A good way to develop consensus within your organisation is to develop a communication strategy and to build up effective media contacts:

## STEP ONE

### Develop a communication strategy

Critical elements of a communication strategy are:

**a. your message**

**b. target audiences and target media**

**ad.a.** You need to be able to tell journalists and through them the general public what your organisation stands for and does in no more than three lines. Forget our common slang, put it in words that anybody can understand. Make sure that central values (such as the right to decide and the right to choose) are part of that message.

And most important: make sure that everyone in your organisation shares those values and shares the message. Discuss these issues for as long as it takes to get everybody on the same track. Media is ruthless: a person uncomfortable with the message he or she is bringing, will get into trouble within minutes on tv and within fifteen minutes in an interview for the printed press.

**ad.b.** Different audiences are reached by different media. If, for instance, young people are the audience that you want to reach, find out which media they use.

More important, find out which media they trust. Soaps for instance are sometimes a very good tool to give information and to stimulate discussion, but, research shows that some soaps do not have anything to do with reality and people realize that. Bringing your message in a soap like that can have the opposite effect. The same is true for tabloid newspapers, people read them for fun, not to get real information.

Pornographic or half pornographic magazines may be very popular among men but the same men do know that the world presented in these magazines is not real. Your real message will not have any effect here.

If you have identified your target audience(s), find out for what purpose you want to reach them:

- to become clients,
- to stimulate discussions,
- to inform them on what to do in specific cases,
- to educate them on values,
- to help them develop opinions,

and choose your media accordingly.

Generally spoken the following remarks on different media can be made:

**a.** printed press tends to be an elite medium which is very appropriate to reach out to the influential people, politicians and policy makers in your society.

**b.** radio tends to be a medium for a very broad audience, it is everywhere where tv has not arrived yet and it remains in many places where tv has settled in. It has an entertainment function but is also very useful for the distribution of information and serious discussions on issues. Radio is also very often interactive which does have great advantages.

**c.** tv tends to be mainly a medium for entertainment. Exceptions are sometimes talkshows and newsshow but even these are made more and more to entertain rather than to inform.

For our goals, no medium is too small. Research shows that issues in the media make their way up: a story in

a local newspaper or regular coverage on the local radio will sooner or later lead to the national newspapers and radio and finally (but usually last) to national tv. The same applies, by the way, to negative coverage or to misinformation. Do not make the mistake to ignore lies about your organisation or the issues you are working on in an unimportant medium; if you do not counteract, the same lie will pop up again and again at unexpected places and times.

If you have set your messages, your target audiences and your target media, it is time to look at the means and tools you can use, to develop a workplan.

## STEP TWO

### **Build up effective media contacts**

Building up media contacts depends first and foremost on building personal contacts with journalists. You can do this by:

- a.** providing them with quality information. Keep it short, most journalists are getting a lot of paper every day. They are not going to read your beautiful evaluation report. They need a fact sheet that highlights the most important findings, framed in a way that relates it to timely discussions.
- b.** answering their questions immediately. Journalists have deadlines and they will most probably call you half an hour before they pass that dead line. If the person who is answering the phone at your organisation promises to call back within a week it will be the last call you receive from that particular journalist.
- c.** not lying to journalists on whatever occasion. They will find out, and it will ruin your relationship forever.
- d.** not taking anything for granted; most journalists cover a lot of issues, they are probably not very well informed on your issues. Do not assume that they know what you mean by, for instance, talking about reproductive rights.
- e.** helping them frame your issues in a way they can convince their editors that your story is important. Keep

an eye on what is going on in the media, our issues are related to a lot of other ongoing discussions. New reports on the results of girls in schools? Call them with your story on teenage pregnancy and what that does to the girls perspectives on formal schooling, to give just one example.

### STEP THREE

#### **Define your tool and materials**

**a.** Your work is news if you make it news. Opening a clinic is news if a locally important person is opening the clinic. A training course for women working in education is news if you show journalists that the women are learning something new. A new video film for education in youth centers or schools is news if you invite journalists to a screening with the possibility to interview young people about it afterwards. Broadening the range of contraceptives in your clinic is news, the headline being: Now more choice for women in this region.

**b.** Send out press releases that are short, to the point and mainly meant to keep journalists updated on your work. Do not expect them to make it into the paper every time, it is enough if they know your name after a while and if they look at your materials briefly every time you send them. Be cost effective. Most journalists do not care about glossy materials, they recognize real information when they see it.

**c.** Organise press briefings when you really feel that you have something that should go out to the general public. A few tips: find out what an appropriate time is for journalists to join, do it in a place that is easy to reach, make it short and give them the opportunity to make interviews with your spokespeople after the briefing. And a warning: try to stay out of buying journalists at all costs. Serve drinks and sandwiches, provide transport, but do not pay. Envelop journalism or cheque book journalism is nowhere popular, not even in the countries where it is commonly practiced. Try to find other incentives such as being a help to their career by giving them access to international conferences or important visitors

of your organisation, by giving them hints or exclusive interviews.

**d.** Organise some sort of event that makes a nice photograph at least once a year. It can really be anything: Handing out flowers to women on mothers day to get attention for maternal mortality, an exhibition on a poster contest on whatever among young people, a lecture from an internationally known guest, a field trip to your groups on the country side, a peer education role play, handing out condoms to taxi drivers and so on.

**e.** Be active. Call the staff of a talk show if you heard the anchor person say something that relates to your issues or your work, send letters to the editor if you are not able to get a journalist to make an interview. And look at others than journalists only. Columnists are important opinion leaders in many countries. Make sure they know you and your work.

**f.** Have good spokespersons. Most organisations will appoint their director as the most important spokesperson. This is not necessarily the most talented spokesperson but the good news is that almost anybody can learn to be an effective spokesperson in a short period of time. A media training of a day or two can teach you how to avoid the most commonly made mistakes, to communicate effectively and to deal with media in a way that benefits your work and your organisation.

**g.** New media, such as the Internet, are important but not as important as many people think these days. If you have to choose between a web site and a staff-member to make phone calls and to maintain personal contacts, do not hesitate to choose the person instead of the machine.

**h.** You may find yourselves in a situation where you have followed all above mentioned steps carefully without getting the name of your organisation properly spelt even in the local newspaper. You know that your colleagues are wondering what you are doing. You feel really disappointed. Think about this: it took most well known NGOs more than five years of hard work to generate visibility within the media. Most media will

more likely pay attention to the issues you are dealing with than to your organisation, do not bother about that, good coverage on the issues is good for your organisation as well. Organise another staff brainstorm afternoon to get ideas from all your colleagues to improve the performance of the organisation and invest.

### **3. Dealing With Disaster**

We are dealing with controversial issues which means that most of us are also once in a while or on a regular basis dealing with hostile media.

The reasons for being hostile need to be identified:

- a. Media that is hostile towards you because they are not well enough informed**
- b. Media that is intentionally hostile to you**

**ad.a.** Many NGOs suffer from shyness whenever they do something that can cause discussion, such as organising sex education in schools. They try to hide what they do. That strategy will cause major difficulties (it did in fact, in many countries). The best way to do this is:

If you know you are doing something that is controversial, organise the discussion yourself. That enables you to stay in control. Put an interview in the papers, on the radio or on tv, announce what you want to do and ask for reactions. Discuss your case; there is nothing you have to hide and you will be able to get many people on your side.

If people find out what you are doing (whether it be sex education or giving contraceptives to young unmarried individuals) you will be put in a position where you have to defend yourself, not only for what you are doing but also for hiding it.

In case of real disaster, someone died while being in your care for instance, illegal activities or other bad news, most people have a natural tendency to close the curtains and to unplug the telephone. Wrong reaction.

Open your doors wide, be the first to announce what has happened, show commitment and report on what you have done to make sure this will not happen again. In other words: Control the events before they control you.

**ad.b.** Some media are hostile to your work and your organisation on purpose, because of their ownership, religion or bias. You are wasting your time trying to convince them, do not give them interviews or materials. Try to counteract them with positive coverage in other media.

The RHI Practical Media Guide is part of the ComNet's press activities. The "Information and Communication Network" (ComNet) is a Regional Dimension Project funded by the EC/UNFPA under the EC/UNFPA Initiative for Reproductive Health in Asia (RHI) and co-ordinated by the German Foundation for World Population (DSW). It aims at informing the international community about the activities of the RHI and helping the partners of the RHI to increase their capacity in the field of Information and Communication.

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