SESSION 5

Building a Media List

A media list is a document with a list of reporters, editors, producers, bloggers and more. It's used to send pitches, press releases and press advisories.

This document includes general guidelines and best practices for building a media list.

Step 1: *Decide which outlets are appropriate for your pitch.*

As you build a media list, consider which type of outlets to include:

- **Television**: Do your pitches typically have TV-friendly visuals?
- **Radio**: Do your pitches typically have audio-friendly aspects?
- **National Newspapers**: Does your organization have news of national significance?
- **Magazines**: Are you prepared to pitch a story months in advance? Do you have a deeper story to tell?
- **Ethnic Media**: Does your organization have news that impacts a particular ethnic community?
- **Industry Specific**: Does your organization work on issues focused on a specific issue, like education, philanthropy, health, technology, etc.?
- **Blogs**: Does the blogger's platform and audience align with yours?

Step 2: *Know the reporter, beat and outlet.*

- Learn who you are pitching to. Look at the reporter's recent coverage, social media posts and know how your news fits within their beat, interests, perspective and approach.
- Know the outlet's audience and why they would care about the issues your organization works on.

Step 3: *Decide what contact information you'll need.*

Most media lists include the following:

- **Outlet name**
- **First name**
- **Last name**
- **Title**
- **Beat**
- **Email**
- **Phone number**
- **Social media pages**

Step 4: *Find media contacts and add them to your list.*

There are a number of fee-based databases used to find media contacts,such as Cision, Muck Rack and Meltwater. However, if you don't have access to these platforms, you can often find contact information through a Google search, in their Twitter bio or on Linkedin.

SESSION 5

LTE Best Practices

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What is a Letter to the Editor (LTE)?

A LTE is a response to a recent news article that introduces new information that is relevant to the story. Typically, news organizations require that the letter to the editor be submitted within seven days from when the original article was published.

Characteristics of a LTE

- Typically between 150 – 200 words.
- A response to a recent news article.
- A strong voice from a credible writer.

Tips for writing a compelling LTE

- Keep it focused on **one** subject.
- Be **clear and concise**.
  - Keep the LTE brief to ensure no content is cut by the media outlet.
- Make **references** to the newspaper and the article.
- Offer a **thoughtful** response and point of view that challenges the article, supports the argument in the article with additional evidence and insight or uses the article to posit another strong opinion.
- **Include** contact information.
  - Some newspapers will only print a letter to the editor after verifying the author. Newspapers will not share personal information.

Structure

- **Lede**: Grab the reader's attention with an introduction to what you will be talking about with a connection to the news article.
- **Thesis**: State information in response to the current article.
- **Argument**: Explain why the new information that is being presented in the LTE is relevant to readers.
- **Conclusion**: Circle back to the thesis to reaffirm it.
- **Byline**: Name, title and brief (two-to-three sentences) bio about the author of the LTE and any affiliations.

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Media Rules of Engagement

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An interview is not a conversation

- Come with your own agenda.
- Be prepared to get your messages in there.
- Do not wait to be asked.
- Use the opportunity to promote your work.
- Use your answers to steer the conversation where you want it to go.

It's not the question, it's the answer

- The readers/viewers/listeners almost never hear or see the question.
- You have control by what you say or don't say.
- It's not the reporter, it is the audience.
- You want to reach the readers, listeners and viewers.

You can say "I don't know"

- Be factual and do not guess or speculate. You can always refer them to your website or follow up later.

Never say "no comment"

- There is always something you can say.

If you don't want to be quoted, say something really boring

- "Off the record" is information given to a reporter in confidence without the intention of publication.
- Keep in mind that different reporters might have different understanding of this.
- You might as well always be "on the record."

"On background" means the reporter can publish the information you provide but not attribute it to you or your organization

- Although you can provide reporters with information "on background," they likely won't publish it if they can't cite or reveal their source.

Know your rights

- You have the right to know who is interviewing you and why they are covering the story.
- You have the right to ask questions.
- You have the right to take time to prepare.
- You have the right to start over.
- You have the right to ask and review quotes before going to print.
- You do NOT have the right to review a story before it is published.
- You do NOT have the right to retract anything you have said (even if you start over).

SESSION 5

Op-Ed Best Practices

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What are op-eds?

An **op-ed** is an article, written by someone other than an employee of the news organization, **that expresses the strong, informed and focused opinion of the writer** on a current and relevant issue. An op-ed is an original piece about a timely topic that has not been published anywhere else.

Characteristics of an op-ed

- Typically between 500 - 700 words.
- Has a clearly defined message and point of view.
- Incorporates the strong voice of a credible writer.

Remember: An op-ed is not a personal essay, story write-up, or think piece. Op-eds almost always require a clear and urgent public policy "ask."

When to use op-eds for storytelling (and why)

- Media outlets are increasingly less interested in policy op-eds from advocates and experts. They want to hear from a person who has been directly impacted by the issue who will tell their story. These op-eds are easier to place and more impactful.
- Op-eds enable more personal detail than social media posts, but unlike videos, they don't leave room for a story's depth and complexity (given the word count limitations).
- Op-eds can be more time-consuming than other forms of story sharing (e.g., sharing a social media post) and placement is not always a guarantee, so be intentional about choosing the story.

Basics of writing an op-ed

- Focus on an issue that affects a target audience and demonstrates the writer's expertise on the issue.
- Identify a specific problem.
- Have a clearly defined position and point of view.
- Defend the opinion by providing evidence.
- Propose a practical solution.

What to share in an op-ed

- **The underlying messages you're conveying** (value, problem, solution and action).
  - The call-to-action is an explicit policy you are trying to change or adopt. Ex. the state legislature must include child care subsidies in the budget.
- **The story that illustrates your message**
  - See Elements of a Story (protagonist, challenge, transformation).
- **Author(s):**
  - The op-ed can be written in first-person by (or on behalf of) the person who experienced the problem. (Remember you can use your own stories, too).
  - Alternatively, you can get permission from that person and describe their experiences in third-person or from your own perspective.
- **Data points:**
  - Tell a story that advocates a position and is supported by facts and research.
  - A few data points can show that this story represents a societal problem.

Tips for writing a compelling op-ed

- Hook the reader with an **anecdote** or **relevant news story**.
- Be direct in the thesis sentence and first paragraph.
  - **Be clear and bold in expressing an opinion.**
  - Considering the following question: If you could only print this one sentence, how would you persuade your readers?
- Make the point of view different from what is already in the discourse on this topic.
- Be clear and **don't use jargon**.

Additional resources

- Sample op-ed.
- Harvard: Guidelines on how to write an op-ed or column.
- Bret Stephens from the New York Times: 15 Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers.
- The Op-Ed Project.

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Op-Ed Template

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Paragraph 1 (opening paragraph or lede):

Grab the reader's attention. Starting with the challenge can bring your audience into the middle of the story. Include the description of the protagonist, their feelings and their values to make them relatable. Bring up news hooks if they are timely and relevant.

Example Opening:

> I couldn't see any way out. All I wanted to do was provide for my 4-month-old baby. [protagonist] To do that, I needed to find a job. In the middle of struggling with postpartum depression, I tried to find childcare that I could trust to take care of my baby so I could look for work. But I couldn't afford it. [challenge]

Paragraph 2 (thesis):

State your argument as close to the top as possible, and include urgency.

Example Thesis:

> The state legislator is on the verge of voting on the budget. [news hook]. It needs to ensure no one else has to go through what I did by including subsidies for childcare. [thesis]

Paragraph 3:

Continue story of protagonist and challenge.

Paragraph 4:

Describe the problem as widespread or systemic with supporting data or history.

Paragraph 5:

Describe the solution as common-sense, practical and accessible. Identify and explain two to three reasons why your solution will benefit your audience.

Paragraph 6:

Describe the protagonist's transformation. How has the protagonist changed as a result of their journey? How can the world be a better place if we learn from their story?

Example Transformation:

> Since those impossible days, I've become an advocate for affordable childcare. I was eventually able to begin working, but I think about how many other mothers have not been as lucky.

Paragraph 7:

This is the "To be sure…" paragraph. Acknowledge any flaws and shortcomings in the argument and address any potential counter-arguments.

Paragraph 8:

Call to Action. Make your policy "ask" specific and clear.

Byline:

Include a name, title and brief, two-to-three sentence bio about the author.