COMMUNICATING THROUGH THE MEDIA | A PRACTICAL GUIDE

MEDIA

strategy press releases media lists messaging goals tough questions blogs rss how to communicate websites tips

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE

To communicate effectively, you must know how to work with and through the media.

How to Write...

Sample...

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

COMMUNICATIONS IS CRUCIAL to the work of advocacy organizations. It should be integrated into every effort to inform and educate about your issues and to advocate for change. An effective communications strategy advances your organization's work and helps you achieve your goals. Writing an op-ed or creating a multimedia piece are tactics, part of a comprehensive communications strategy, not efforts to be undertaken in isolation.

- **IDENTIFY YOUR DECISION MAKER,** the person or people who can help you achieve your overall objective. A communications strategy will also need to identify your target audience. A target audience may be your decision maker or it may be the people who can help to influence your decision maker. The media itself is not the final audience. Rather, the media is one way of reaching your audience. Different media outlets are appropriate for different audiences. Some audiences are better reached through a conference, partnership with a professional association, or one-on-one meetings.
- **DEVELOP YOUR MESSAGE.** Know what you want to tell your target audience, what you want them to understand, what you want them to do. If you don't have a strong, focused message, others—even the media—will provide one for you. And you might not like what you hear.
- **CREATE A FOLLOW-UP PLAN.** If you get a good story about your issue or program, you need to be ready to use that publicity to build momentum for change, find allies for your goals, or raise additional funds. If your advocacy video goes viral, you need to be sure it has a strong "ask," something people can do to advance your campaign goals. Otherwise, you've wasted a golden opportunity.

The Open Society Institute's Office of Communications has helped many of its grantees and partners put together a communications strategy that includes, where appropriate, a plan for working through the media. There are many tools for securing exposure in new and old media. This guide outlines tried and true methods as well as emerging ones.

We realize there is no single approach to media that works for every organization. The media environment differs greatly from place to place and some of the tactics discussed in this document may not be applicable in all situations—though we believe that many of the tips provided here are useful as general guidance. Organizations working with the Open Society Institute should direct media inquiries about the foundation or George Soros to Amy Weil at OSI's Office of Communications—aweil@sorosny.org or 212.548.0381.

02 MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MESSAGING STRATEGY is invaluable in this oversaturated media environment that leaves little room for nuanced or abstract ideas. The key to a successful message is using language that makes your point both accessible and compelling to your target audience.

While it might seem to be "dumbing down" a complex problem, message development is a way for you to clarify and distill your thoughts about the issue at hand. Further, it offers an opportunity for you to frame the issue in your own terms. What is the headline you want to see? What is the crux of the problem? And what are the two or three points you want your audience to come away with?

- IDENTIFY YOUR MESSAGE—three to five sentences that encapsulate the problem or issue, and your mission and goals, in a simple, accessible way. Assume you are speaking to people with little or no knowledge of the issue or your organization.
- TRY TO THINK, AND SPEAK, IN SOUND BITES. Use short, quotable sentences that make your point in stark, dramatic terms. For example, "This proposed law will strangle civil society," is more effective than, "The draft law now being debated in parliament has the potential to have unfortunate consequences for civil society organizations."
- FIND THE NEWS HOOK. A news hook ties your story to a current event or trend and helps make your issue interesting to reporters and their editors. Connecting your story to something else happening in the media—like a visit by a government leader or a local controversy—will underscore the significance of your news.
- REPEAT YOUR MESSAGES. Every press release, media interview, op-ed, blog posting, and letter to the editor should contain your key messages.
- IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE. This will help shape how you talk about the issue, and what vocabulary you use. Are you targeting national policymakers, business people, or lawyers and doctors?
- COME UP WITH A LIST OF QUESTIONS you are likely to receive and have additional supporting messages ready—statistics and other hard facts are always helpful.
- AVOID JARGON AND NGO-SPEAK. References to stakeholders and capacity-building mechanisms might have meaning within the NGO community, but jargon makes your message inaccessible to anyone else.
- AVOID ACRONYMS WHENEVER POSSIBLE. Well-known acronyms like HIV and UN are fine, but most names of institutions and programs should be spelled out.

MEDIA LISTS

03

MEDIA LISTS ENABLE YOU TO ACT QUICKLY when you want to send out a press release or hold a press event. You should constantly update your media lists with the names and contact information of new reporters who write about your issues or attend your events.

- DEVELOP MEDIA LISTS tailored to particular issues or beats that include reporters in all media.
- DON'T FORGET THE WIRE SERVICES AND BLOGS. World-wide services like Reuters and Agence France-Presse, as well as local services, maximize your reach by distributing articles to news outlets around the globe or to countries or regions of potential interest. Most reporters check the wires first to see who is quoted and often call that person as a source. If you get on the wires, you are much more likely to receive calls asking for comment. The same is true of blogs. Include them in your outreach.
- IDENTIFY THE RIGHT REPORTER. Do your homework. As you read the news, make note of reporters who are covering or sympathetic to your issues. You can also call the news outlet and ask the assignment desk: "Who is your Karachi correspondent? Who covers health? Who covers education?" You can also usually figure out the formula for a news outlet's email addresses if you have at least one reporter's email address. (For example, Firstname.Lastname@bbc.co.uk.) If you are put through directly to the reporter, be ready to pitch your story idea, press conference, or any other news item. If you don't have a news item and you are just updating your list, say so.
- COMMUNICATE WITH THE RIGHT REPORTER. Don't send out your press release on revenue transparency in Africa to public health reporters in the United States. You risk losing credibility and you will annoy busy reporters who don't have time for misdirected material. Reporters appreciate getting tailored story ideas and appropriate emails, press releases, and statements.
- UPDATE YOUR LISTS in between press releases or events. In this changing news environment, reporters may no longer be employed by the same news outlet or they may have changed beats. Know who covers your issue by reading the news regularly. Routine maintenance of your media lists will save time in the long run and give you credibility with the press.
- KEEP A LIST OF REPORTERS attending your event. Have a sign-in sheet asking for each reporter's name, news outlet, email address, phone number, and fax number. These lists will come in handy when it comes to follow-up and future events or press releases.
- THINK BROADLY. Discuss with other staff how you might pitch your story and spread your message. Is this a story with international appeal, or does it only have local impact? Can you make it a wider story? Is it breaking news or something for a weekly or monthly publication? Is the story right for a video treatment that can be distributed virally across the web?

04 PRESS CONFERENCES, BRIEFINGS, AND PANELS

HOLD PRESS CONFERENCES when you have news to announce that reporters cannot get over the phone or in a press release. If you are going to take time out of a reporter's day, make sure that you have a reason. Otherwise, your organization's credibility will be questioned.

Press conferences should be used sparingly. Consider carefully what your goals are: do you have something to announce and who is your audience? If not, you may better accomplish your aim of educating the press about an issue by holding a panel discussion or briefing. Even if a press conference is warranted, you might consider holding it on the web or by phone. Reporters are more likely to call in than to show up.

- **BRING SPOKESPEOPLE.** When possible, in addition to your own spokespeople, invite others, such as the researcher who conducted the study, a person affected by the issue, a grantee, or an official who is going to implement the policy. This will make the press conference more useful to reporters.
- **TIE PRESS CONFERENCES TO A NEWS HOOK.** You can create a news hook that attracts reporters by linking your issue to an important recent or upcoming event or anniversary.
- **TIMING IS KEY.** Hold your press conference on a day and at a time that is most convenient for the press and allows you a day on either end to do prep work and follow-up. Don't release news the afternoon before a holiday or weekend unless you don't want it covered. Try to hold press conferences in the morning between 10:00 a.m. and noon. Press conferences should be held no later than 1:00 p.m. to give reporters time to write and file their stories.
- **ENTICE REPORTERS TO COME TO YOUR EVENTS.** Don't tell them your news over the phone, otherwise they may not come. Your job is to pique their interest without stepping on your story. You might also want to offer food.
- **CONSIDER HOLDING A BRIEFING** or panel discussion instead of a press conference. While press conferences are used to announce news, a forum such as a panel or briefing offers reporters a more in-depth analysis of an issue, initiative, or the findings of a new report. The goal is not to generate a story (although it can happen), but to build relationships with reporters, demonstrate your expertise, and frame the debate. Breakfast and luncheon events are often popular and well attended by the press. Remember, even during a briefing or forum, everything your spokesperson says is on the record. Briefings should consist of presentations with ample time for follow-up questions. If appropriate, panel discussions should be videoed for your website and edited for other presentations.

INTERVIEW TIPS

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF THINGS YOU CAN DO to make sure an interview with a reporter goes well. First, and most importantly, you should decide whether you want to do the interview. If you don't know the reporter, do a Google or Nexis search. How do they cover your issue or organization? You should feel free to ask the reporter what he or she plans to ask and, if you are uncomfortable with the questions, turn down the interview.

If you decide to do the interview, review your messages and also figure out what messages you do not want to convey. Devise strategies for dealing with those questions you don't want to answer. Finally, if you have time, you can review any recent news stories on the issue.

General Tips

- REMEMBER WHY you got into this line of work. Convey your passion!
- STICK TO YOUR TALKING POINTS. It may feel strange if the talking points don't seem to address the questions, but there are simple verbal bridges for moving from the reporter's question to your message: "I'm not sure about that, but what I do know is . . ." "What I really want to talk to you about is . . ."
- REMEMBER, AN INTERVIEW is not a conversation. Beware of the chatty reporter who tries to get you to let your guard down.
- DO NOT SAY "WE." Say the full name of your organization.
- DO NOT REPEAT THE NEGATIVE. Watch out for "Don't you agree . . ." or "Would you say that . . ." These are techniques for putting words in your mouth.
- DO NOT MAKE THINGS UP. If you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to say so. But avoid "no comment." It sounds suspicious.
- DO NOT BE AFRAID OF SILENCE. If you are finished answering the question, you don't need to go on. Don't say more than you want to say. Wait for the next question.
- NOTHING IS EVER "OFF THE RECORD." Don't say anything you don't want to see in print or on the air.

Print

- SPEAK IN ONE- TO TWO-SENTENCE QUOTES.
- SPEAK SLOWLY.
- REMEMBER, ANYTHING YOU SAY to a reporter could end up in a story—even if it's "for background," "off the record," or "not for attribution."
- IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER to a question but you know someone who does, refer the reporter elsewhere or offer to look up the answer after the interview.

Radio

- SPEAK IN 7- TO 11-SECOND SOUND BITES.
- IF IT IS A PHONE INTERVIEW and you are having trouble conveying passion, give the interview while standing up—it will add energy.
- REMEMBER TO SMILE when appropriate—a smile will come through in your voice.

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06 INTERVIEW TIPS

Television

- SPEAK IN 7- TO 11-SECOND SOUND BITES.
- IF YOU ARE WITH THE INTERVIEWER in a studio or on location, look at the person asking you the questions, not at the camera (unless otherwise directed). If you are in a remote studio, look at the camera, not at the monitor or technicians off to the side.
- IF SEATED, SIT UP STRAIGHT, on the edge of your chair, with both feet planted on the floor. Beware the swivel chair.
- REMOVE YOUR GLASSES to reduce reflection (as long as you are comfortable not wearing them).
- REMOVE LARGE JEWELRY THAT DANGLES, glitters, or is generally distracting.
- DON'T WEAR A TIE WITH COLORFUL STRIPES or patterns that jump around when you move.
- PULL OR COMB YOUR HAIR away from your face.
- MAKEUP IS YOUR FRIEND! Sweaty, shiny skin is magnified by the glare of the television lights. At the very least, dab your face with blotting tissues or powder.
- DO NOT WEAR PURE BLACK OR STARK WHITE. If you must wear a black suit, put a shirt with a color underneath. No bold designs, patterns, etc.

Live Radio or Television

- CONSIDER TAKING COMMUNICATIONS STAFF with you to the interview.
- SMILE! (If the subject is very serious, try to smile with your eyes.)
- ASSUME THAT THE CAMERA IS ALWAYS ON YOU and the microphone is always live (even if you are not actually in the studio).
- REMEMBER THAT EVEN SMALL FACIAL movements can look exaggerated on TV. Try to refrain from fidgeting or excessive blinking—hold your head still and don't look up or down or dart your eyes around.
- BEWARE HAND GESTURES. Too many hand gestures undermine your message.
- DO NOT MAKE FACES OR ROLL YOUR EYES when something is said that you disagree with.
- DO NOT GET ANGRY OR CONDESCENDING. Even statements like "As I said before . . ." can come off as condescending.
- IF YOU ARE IN A DEBATE FORMAT, do not be afraid to interrupt, but do so gracefully. For example, use the host's name and say, "X, I really have to disagree here . . ."

After the Interview

- SIT DOWN WITH YOUR STAFF and review your performance (especially TV interviews).
- WERE THERE ANY QUESTIONS that blindsided you? Discuss these questions with your staff to help develop a strategy for dealing with them.

BE A GOOD SOURCE: BUILDING RELATIONS WITH THE PRESS

THE BEST WAY TO GET YOUR STORY COVERED is to pitch your idea tailored to specific reporters. This can be more time-consuming than blasting a press release to a list of hundreds, but more effective.

- **CONTACT REPORTERS** with important, newsworthy information. For instance, when a new study is released you can send a copy to a reporter with a short note saying, "I thought you might be interested in seeing this." You can make a follow-up call after sending the material to comment or to see if the reporter wants someone to talk to (refer to your spokesperson list).
- **MAKE SUCCINCT PITCHES.** When pitching story ideas, send two or three paragraphs on the issue along with your contact information and your organization's URL. Editors and reporters can get hundreds of emails a day; make their job as easy as possible. Critical information should be in the first paragraph; the goal is to entice a reporter into contacting you for more information.
- **RESPECT DEADLINES.** Always ask reporters you are calling if this is a good time to talk. If a reporter says she or he is on deadline and cannot speak at the moment, ask when a good time would be for you to call back. Don't try to make your points when a reporter is on deadline; this is not an effective way to be heard or build a relationship. The only exception is when the reporter is working on the story you are calling about; he or she might welcome a new quote or perspective to complete the story.
- **BE RESPONSIVE.** Return calls from reporters as soon as possible. This will increase your chances of becoming an ongoing source.
- **PROVIDE THE HUMAN ANGLE,** especially when dealing with the American and British press. Who is the individual with a compelling story at the center of the issue? Use the human angle to anchor policy messages. Think about how to make the story compelling in your own country.
- **HAVE CLEAR CHARTS,** graphs, photographs, and other visuals ready for print and television reporters.
- **IN ADDITION TO THE TRADITIONAL MEDIA,** look for opportunities in the new media, posting your story on your organization's website, encouraging others to link to it, blogging directly about your issue, and persuading established bloggers to cover the story.

08 RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES IN THE MEDIA

ONE OF THE KEY CHALLENGES facing many nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations is the need to overcome the public's perceptions about advocacy work. Groups doing advocacy are often mistakenly believed to be political organizations and are more vulnerable to attacks in the media.

It is important not to allow hostile press to overwhelm your good work. Responding to a spurious charge can sometimes give legs to a story that might otherwise fade away. But letting accusations go unaddressed can also backfire by perpetuating the idea that your organization has something to hide.

- DECIDE WHEN IT IS USEFUL TO RESPOND. You may not want to address all accusations or attacks in the press. If you do want to respond to a charge, don't repeat the accusation and offer a denial; this makes you appear defensive. (Think of Richard Nixon's famous line "I am not a crook" as an example of what not to do.) Instead, reframe the issue and move on. Offer a positive example of what your organization is doing to offset the negative charge.
- KEEP TRACK OF THE MEDIA. Are the attacks building or waning? Who is leading the charge? What outlets are driving it? Is it the usual suspects or have the attacks been picked up by previously friendly or neutral news outlets?
- BUILD A COALITION. Seek supporters outside the usual circle of grantees and partners. Broadening your base of support by reaching out to groups that are not necessarily natural allies can serve as a bulwark against attacks and increase your legitimacy in the public eye.
- ADVERTISE YOUR GOOD WORKS. The better known your organization becomes the more it will be subject to public scrutiny. Your organization's reputation can and needs to be used to your advantage. When faced with hostility, point to your record of achievement and remind people of the immense contributions your organization has made to society.

WEBSITES, BLOGS, AND MORE 09

YOU CAN DIRECT A BUSY REPORTER TO YOUR WEBSITE for online press releases, background information, and good-quality photography, video, and artwork. But the website is not the only new media tool that can help you communicate your message, and reporters should not be the sole focus of your outreach efforts. For example, you should have an approach to working with bloggers that is every bit as thorough and professional as a traditional press relations program.

Websites

- YOU WILL NEED AN UP-TO-DATE WEBSITE to serve as a hub for your work. This may be difficult to do if you are not producing a lot of content, but there are some best practices that should be followed. Words like "tomorrow" and "yesterday," for example, should be avoided (except in press releases), as they can go out of date quickly. Also, time-sensitive content should be clearly distinguished from evergreen content. If you have breaking news, place it on a separate part of the page and highlight it. And always use dates on all your pages: If a reporter or blogger can't see how old something is, how will she or he know whether to trust the material?
- CREATE AN ONLINE NEWSROOM: a space on your website clearly marked for and tailored to the press. This section is the web face you put forth to the media, so keep it simple and professional. It should contain contact information (name, address, email, phone and fax numbers), press releases (most recent ones first), and backgrounders (bios, fact sheets, speeches). Your online newsroom can also contain downloadable artwork—approved photos, charts, and graphics available in print (300 dpi) and web (72 dpi) quality—which could be a deciding factor for an editor who is on the fence about running your story. (Do not, however, give away photos for publication unless you have permission from the photographer or agency.)
- WRITE SMART MICROCONTENT across your entire website. Microcontent—titles, headlines, decks (the lines below the headline that describe what an article is about) and other small pieces of web copy—gives the reader a snapshot of what the page is about. Microcontent actually does most of the communicating on your website, so it should be short, scannable, and context-free. If reporters cannot understand your title and deck, there's a good chance they won't read the rest of the page.
- DIRECT REPORTERS AND BLOGGERS to your website and make sure it is regularly updated with news and announcements. Providing a link to your "About" section and the "Newsroom" will ensure that a busy reporter quickly gets the latest public information about your organization.

Bloggers

- DON'T FORGET BLOGGERS. Even though bloggers often operate more informally than traditional journalists, they can play a key role in promoting your issues and keeping them alive long after the stories have disappeared from the mainstream media. Sometimes a blogger will even be the first to break a story that is then picked up and carried more broadly in the press. You should regularly cultivate relationships with bloggers, reaching out to them like you would a reporter who covers your beat. Read a blog before you contact its author. Compose an email that is personal and reflects your knowledge of the blog. And above all else, treat the blogger respectfully, the same way you would any other journalist.

- NEVER SEND UNSOLICITED email attachments. Bloggers and reporters are too busy to deal with downloads and others are worried about email viruses. Also, avoid using excessive capital letters or punctuation in your subject lines—two tactics that send red flags to virus and spam filters. Finally, never send out an email with your entire distribution list in the "To" field. This is impersonal and will not help you build good relations. Use the "Bcc" field when sending mass emails such as press releases.

RSS Feeds and Twitter

- EMAIL IS IMPORTANT, BUT, with Web 2.0 technologies and services like RSS and Twitter on the rise, it is used less and less. RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, is rapidly replacing email as an easy way to distribute headlines and blurbs from your website as soon as they're published. The technology can be invaluable to a blogger or reporter trying to keep track of the content on your site, especially if it is updated on an unpredictable schedule. All major news organizations provide this feature, and it has become essential to the proliferation of the blogosphere. You should add RSS to your website so that journalists, activists, and others can subscribe and receive information on issues that interest them.

- MANY BLOGGERS AND REPORTERS have recently turned to the microblogging service Twitter, which helps people keep abreast of what other people with similar interests are doing. To take advantage of this new service, you first need to open a Twitter account. Then seek out the bloggers and reporters who write about your issues, follow their "tweets," and promote your news to them via your own Twitter posts.

- TWITTER IS ONE WAY TO MONITOR what is being said about your issues online, but there are many other tools available to help you keep an eye on stories that might not have (yet) percolated up to mainstream media coverage. For example, there are services that regularly email to subscribers articles based on a set of search terms or that track mentions of your website in blog posts anywhere on the web.

A Press Release

First, before setting out to write a press release, think about why, and if, you need one. Do you have concrete news to report? Is there a hook—i.e., a recent event or trend that you can link to that makes your news timely and interesting to reporters? Is there a reasonable expectation that it will get coverage? If not, you may not want to waste your good will with reporters by sending them a press release you know they won't pick up.

The ideal press release is straightforward and pithy, with clear, simple language and short sentences. It does not attempt to make more than one main point, and presumes its audience knows little or nothing about the topic at hand. Although the report you are publicizing might be directed at the nonprofit/nongovernmental and policymaking communities, the press release is not. Organizational jargon and overly technical or legal language turn off reporters.

Try to keep press releases to a single page. This is not only necessary when you are distributing releases as hard copies or by fax, but is a good rule to stick by when sending press releases via email. A press release should be a very basic summing-up of a new report or issue—it should not read like an executive summary. Include the most important findings and recommendations from the report and pare them down to the barest essentials.

The first line is the most important. It should not exceed 18 words (a rule often broken) and should provide readers with substantive news. "The Open Society Institute released a report on discrimination against Roma today," does not work. The fact that OSI published a report is not interesting to most journalists. You have to make them want to keep reading. If you are announcing a publication with no major news peg, the key here is to tease out the actual news in your report. Do you have something new to say? What did the report find? Put the substance up front: "Roma face rising economic and social disparities in new European Union states, the Open Society Institute said today."

The lead sentence should include in the second clause something like: "The Open Society Institute said today," or "The Soros Foundation–Kazakhstan urged the government to," etc. Good verbs to use here are "said," "urged," "charged," "called on," "condemned," and "criticized." Don't use verbs like "asserted" or "claimed," because they weaken the statement.

Use a quote in the second or third paragraph. The formula for quotes is: "One sentence before the name," said X. "The quote after the name is also ideally one sentence. But it can be two if they are really short." Quotes should express an opinion, not impart new facts or repeat information already provided. They should be conversational and assertive. Read it out loud: does it sound like something you would actually say?

Finally, use the active voice. A press release should be forceful, and passive language—"a resolution was passed," "comprehensive surveys were conducted," etc.—comes across as wishy-washy or evasive, and distracts from your message. The active voice helps identify key actors and makes for a more compelling narrative—it is easier for a reader to form a visual image with "Parliament passed a resolution," or "The Open Society Institute conducted door-to-door surveys." The active voice also tends to cut back on the word count.

A Media Alert

Sometimes you may not want to issue a full-fledged press release, especially if you are announcing an event or briefing.

In a busy news climate, imagine you have 10 seconds to capture reporters' attention and interest them in your story. Journalists do not always have time to read lengthy news releases or sift through long reports. How do you alert them to your news in a brief and compelling way?

A media alert (or news advisory) is a simple one-page sheet that can be emailed, faxed, or read on the go. It provides only the most basic but compelling information alerting media to your upcoming news or event. Under your headline, list the date, contact information, and one or two paragraphs that announce the key information about your event: what concrete news will you reveal and why it is of urgent public importance. After that brief explanation, an advisory lists the "who, when, where, what, and why" that should make the media care about your press conference, event, or report.

WHO: Who will announce your news? List the spokespeople from your foundation, grantee, or allied organization who will be speaking, and their titles. Remember that the news is not that you are having an event or that you are announcing something—it is what is being announced. Be sure to reveal the news in the first two paragraphs, and indicate who is saying it.

WHEN: Day, date, time, a.m. or p.m., should be in a large, clear typeface for easy readability.

WHERE: List the address and location of the event. Include brief directions if necessary.

WHAT: What news are you announcing? List your event, report, press conference or release of new findings.

WHY: This is your opportunity to communicate your compelling key message. This is why you are making news. This is why your timely report is of urgent public importance.

If your event will have strong visual components like artwork or groups of people holding a vigil in front of a historic landmark, let reporters know about this photo opportunity. This is useful for television reporters, and don't forget to alert the photo desks at newspapers.

End all advisories and releases with the ### or –30– mark at the bottom center of the page. This lets reporters know the advisory is over. If your press release has two pages, write –*more*– at the bottom and center it. In the top left corner of the next page, write "Page two," and the name of your organization.

An Opinion Piece

Publishing an opinion piece or op-ed is a great way to highlight an individual or your organization's work and assert some measure of control over how an issue is framed.

Op-eds usually follow a formula. Essentially, in some 800 words, an op-ed lays out a problem and offers a prescription. It has a clear point of view and avoids getting bogged down in nuance or tangents. Although it's important to give a nod to opposing points of view or complicating factors, try not to veer off course. Op-eds are meant to be biased and they try to counter conventional thinking on an issue.

A good op-ed—and one that is likely to be picked up—is limited in ambition. Rarely does an op-ed take on the history of Western democracy or the whole of globalization; unless you are a renowned thinker on these subjects, an op-ed of such scope probably won't get placed. Rather, most confront very specific problems or aspects of wider issues. Be careful, however, not to make your op-ed too wonky or esoteric. Remember that you are speaking to a broad audience. If you are writing about legislation or government policies, explain them in a way that shows their impact on ordinary people.

Draw readers in with striking lead sentences. Use descriptive language and verbal visuals, if you can: "Charles Taylor, who faces trial for fomenting a civil war in Sierra Leone that left thousands of women and children with missing limbs . . ." or "The daily suicide bombings that are reducing the Iraqi capital to rubble . . ." Powerful and evocative imagery in the lead will help make your op-ed stand out to editors, especially in the American press.

Think about the byline. Op-ed pages tend to prefer big names or people who are experts in the field they are writing about. Western papers also seek out international writers or people who can offer a personal story with their piece. If your goal is to promote an issue and not your own name or organization, you may want to draft or co-write an op-ed with an outside expert and give that person the byline. You can also submit op-eds with a double byline, though these tend to have a harder time getting placed.

Op-ed pages often run pieces that have clear news hooks or correspond to commemorative dates or anniversaries. An op-ed that can include a line such as, "As we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King . . ." or "Twenty years ago today . . . " may have a better chance of getting placed. Keep in mind, however, that there are likely to be several submissions for such dates and that day's page may fill up well in advance. Get your submission in as soon as possible.

If your piece is accepted, you should expect it to be edited, sometimes heavily. Most papers will send back the edited version for your approval, so try to avoid submitting an op-ed right before taking a big trip during which you'll have spotty email access.

Don't be disappointed if your piece is rejected. Everyone wants to have a byline in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, and the op-ed editors of national newspapers receive numerous submissions a day. Consider writing an op-ed for a local or regional paper, which actually may be a more effective strategy for your issue.

A Letter to the Editor

Writing a letter to the editor can be as tricky as an op-ed, as you have even less space to make your point and the form demands a speedy response. The constraints of the letter format make it more important than ever to be concise.

First, before you begin writing, check to see how long your letter should be. This will give you an idea of the scope within which to work. Publications vary greatly on word limits—check the paper or magazine's website, where you can usually find editorial guidelines for letters. You can also figure out the range by looking at previous letters they have published. Shorter letters usually have a better chance of getting in.

Next decide on the one point you want to make in your letter. In general, your letter should be in response to an article, editorial, or op-ed that has just appeared in the publication. The letter should state your opinion backed up by fact or personal experience. Letters that are original and clever in expressing their opinions have a better chance of being published.

Be strong in your opinions but polite in your address. Don't resort to name calling. A letter to the editor has little chance of being accepted by a reputable publication if it is all rant and diatribe. As your organization's spokesperson, you don't want to be associated with characteristics that label you unreasonable and irresponsible. Even if there is a lot to yell about, stick with facts and opinions expressed in a strong, respectable manner. You will have a better chance of persuading people to your way of thinking.

Be positive when you can. If an article is good on your issue but leaves out something you consider crucial, say so: "So and so's article (date) deserves praise for calling needed attention to a critical issue. Our work with refugees shows that women are doubly discriminated against because . . ." You might also decide to write directly to the reporter (whether or not you submit a letter to the editor) to send him or her more information about the situation of refugee women (or whatever part of the story is a priority for you). But never chastise the reporter for what he or she didn't write. With your help, the reporter will learn more about the situation and write a better story next time or even decide to do a follow-up story on what was originally left out.

If you are trying to correct an error of fact, it might be best to contact the reporter or newsdesk directly and ask them to issue a correction. This can help avoid angering the reporters who cover your issues. Journalists don't like being shown up, especially in a public forum such as a letters page.

Make sure to send in your letter to the editor as soon as possible—ideally the same day the article you are responding to was printed.

Foundation Taps Visionaries to Reform U.S. Justice System

Open Society Institute Awards Fellowships to Reporters, Lawyers, and Advocates in 14 States

Press Release
Date: April 29, 2009
Contacts:

NEW YORK—The Open Society Institute today awarded Soros Justice Fellowships to 17 outstanding individuals working to restore fairness to a deeply flawed criminal justice system.

The lawyers, advocates, scholars, and journalists will tackle issues from death penalty reform and the criminalization of immigrants to juvenile justice and the challenges of parenting in prison. The Soros Justice Fellows will receive a total of more than $1.3 million.

"At a time of uncertainty and hardship for many in America, criminal justice looms as one of our most pressing challenges," said Ann Beeson, executive director of the Open Society Institute's U.S. Programs. "The new group of Soros Justice Fellows will bring fresh ideas to fix a failed system that breaks America's promise of fairness under the law."

Among the new fellows is a community organizer in Nashville whose son was murdered in street violence and who spent more than half her life entangled in the criminal justice system. She will train current and former gang members to become advocates for reform.

Another fellow, a lawyer in Seattle, will challenge a common police practice that targets homeless and poor people and bans them from entire city neighborhoods. In Virginia, a parent whose son was incarcerated in the juvenile justice system is now a full-time advocate for reform in a state that houses youth in adult jails.

The fellows will each receive a stipend of $45,000 to $79,500 to undertake projects lasting 12 to 18 months.

Since 1997, the Open Society Institute has awarded more than $14 million in grants to Soros Justice Fellows as part of a broader effort to strengthen justice in the United States. In the last 25 years, the foundation has given away over $7 billion to build open, democratic societies around the world, including more than $940 million in the United States.

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The Open Society Institute *works to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. To achieve its mission, OSI seeks to shape public policies that assure greater fairness in political, legal, and economic systems and safeguard fundamental rights. On a local level, OSI implements a range of initiatives to advance justice, education, public health, and independent media. At the same time, OSI builds alliances across borders and continents on issues such as corruption and freedom of information. OSI places a high priority on protecting and improving the lives of people in marginalized communities.*

The media is the messenger.
To communicate effectively,
you must pick the right message,
audience, and messenger. This
practical guide will show you how.

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE

International Criminal Court Puts President in the Dock

Aryeh Neier
March 24, 2009

In a way, the stir aroused by the recent decision by the International Criminal Court to indict Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur is a surprise. After all, the court has no means of its own to arrest anyone in Sudan, much less a head of state who commands the country's armed forces. Nor is there any prospect that someone else will intervene in Sudan to make an arrest. While the ICC's chief prosecutor, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, expresses confidence that Bashir will be brought to justice, it is unclear how this will happen. But it could.

Despite the ICC's seeming powerlessness, many governments' leaders are engaged in strenuous efforts to block the indictment. This does not seem to be based on their concern that the charges are unfair; rather, they appear to be demonstrating solidarity with a fellow head of state.

Those denouncing the attempt to put Bashir on trial include the large blocs of countries that are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the African Union, together with such powerful states as China and Russia. One can only guess whether some of those joining this effort are motivated by concern that they themselves may some day face charges like those leveled at Bashir by the ICC judges.

Though Bashir may be able to avoid arrest simply by limiting his international travel, the commotion provoked by the indictment is not irrational. The charges against him have a powerful stigmatizing effect.

The fact that a panel of judges representing the 108 governments that are parties to the ICC has accused Bashir of principal responsibility for the crimes committed in Darfur during the past six years undermines the legitimacy of his continued rule. Those crimes have caused more than 300,000 deaths, and have forcibly displaced at least another 2.7 million people. Even if Bashir's fellow heads of state succeed in their effort to persuade the U.N. Security Council to defer prosecution—which is highly unlikely—the charges will continue to hang over Bashir's head unless and until he stands trial.

In 1999, an international criminal tribunal indicted another sitting head of state, Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Though he seemed secure at the time, a year and a half later he was sent to The Hague to stand trial. Similarly, in 2003, an international criminal tribunal indicted Liberia's then president, Charles Taylor. He had to flee Liberia a few months later and initially received asylum in Nigeria, but is now on trial in The Hague. When those indictments were issued, no one could have predicted how events would unfold; in retrospect, it is evident that the indictments' delegitimizing effects had important consequences.

Of course, the ICC's prosecutor and judges are themselves taking a substantial risk in the indictment of Bashir. The court is still in its infancy, and antagonizing the many government leaders expressing solidarity with him could jeopardize its future.

Yet it should be recognized that the court's personnel are carrying out their duties. The treaty establishing the ICC explicitly states that heads of state do not enjoy immunity. And the Security Council referred the Darfur case to the court in 2005. This was an investigation that had to be conducted, and those found to have the highest level of responsibility for the crimes had to be indicted.

Many of those now objecting to the prosecution of Bashir participated in the decisions leading to the indictment. If the ICC's indictment now causes them discomfort, that is only because they did not anticipate that the court would carry out the responsibilities that they themselves assigned to it.

Aryeh Neier *is president of the Open Society Institute. His op-ed was originally published by Project Syndicate.*

The Open Society Institute works to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens.

Open societies are characterized by the rule of law; respect for human rights, minorities, and a diversity of opinions; democratically elected governments; market economies in which business and government are separate; and a civil society that helps keep government power in check.

To achieve our mission, we seek to shape public policies that assure greater fairness in political, legal, and economic systems and safeguard fundamental rights.

We implement initiatives to advance justice, education, public health, and independent media.

We build alliances across borders and continents on issues such as corruption and freedom of information.

Working in every part of the world, the Open Society Institute places a high priority on protecting and improving the lives of people in marginalized communities.

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