



All Your News Is Fit to Print

Engaging the Media

“If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

—Philosophical riddle

Case in Point: Max Rameau’s Mission*

To meet Max Rameau in his faded T-shirt, cargo pants, and sandals gives lie to the typical image of a successful power broker. He has no expense account to woo media clients. In fact, he gets no salary for what he does; his “office” is an aging Honda. Yet Rameau’s cell phone number is locked into the speed dial of some of South Florida’s most prominent journalists. When he calls, they respond. More often than not news is the result—news presented in the way that Rameau believes helps his cause.

Which is no small thing.

Ask Rameau his mission, and he’ll reply that it’s Pan-Africanism—the betterment of those with African ancestry worldwide. Grandiose, of course, and Rameau, who was born in Haiti and raised in

*I wish to thank Tom Fiedler who wrote the Case in Point section of this chapter on Max Rameau and also xxxx. Fiedler was executive editor of the *Miami Herald* from 2001–2007 and xxxxx.

Washington, D.C., and Miami, will concede that the enormity of the challenge is beyond any individual's efforts. But if he cannot embrace that universal cause, he has learned that he can have a bearing on a local piece of it. How? By inducing local government and civic leaders to take action on his behalf.

In recent years Rameau's projects have profoundly moved public policy. Ex-offenders enjoy more productive lives through a group he founded called Brothers of the Same Mind. The poor and seemingly powerless will have greater clout at the polls because he helped focus attention on problems with voter registration and on flawed voting machines that often discarded ballots. Homeless men and women, some of them displaced from old neighborhoods by pricey condos, may soon have access to housing built on what is now vacant public land.

Rameau's success comes in part from his passion for reform, especially as it will benefit the black community. But even passion would be insufficient were it not for his ability to mobilize the news media, which transforms his personal passion into public action. In short, Rameau knows how to make his cause the media's cause. And he knows that the media's cause often becomes the policy agenda for elected politicians.

"Real change occurs by putting pressure on public officials," Rameau said in an interview for this project. That pressure, he adds, comes from the media.

"People presume that when the media picks up what I am doing and covers it, that it is valid," he said. "They presume that the media has done 'due diligence' on the issue to be sure that it's legitimate."

Getting the media to pick up on the issue is the result of a carefully crafted process that takes planning, patience, timing, and, most of all, an understanding of how the news media works, Rameau said.

It typically begins with an individual problem—what he calls "the surface issue"—that is emblematic of a larger and more

fundamental one affecting countless others. An example from the civil rights battles of a generation ago, Rameau said, would be the inability in many states of a black man or woman to enter into an interracial marriage.

“The story of a black man who couldn’t marry a white woman didn’t attract much sympathy, much less the media’s interest,” he said. “But when that was framed as one example of unequal rights and racial discrimination, then the public became interested.”

Rameau said he began working in the late 1990s on behalf of former felons who had served their sentences and were attempting to regain their places in the community—often against deep resistance. Among the barriers they faced was a full restoration of civil rights enabling them to vote. At the same time, Rameau said, other people were being dropped from voting rolls in broad purges for no other reason than having the same name as a felon.

His efforts were largely unavailing until the 2000 presidential election in Florida, when tens of thousands of voided ballots—many of them cast in African American precincts—likely tilted the outcome to George W. Bush. “After that debacle we were able to show people that election reform was linked to democracy being threatened. Everyone could understand that, everyone could connect to the idea that if their vote is taken away, they are powerless in a democracy.”

In a strategic sense, Rameau moved the issue from being a problem faced by a few individuals—former felons or people with the same names—to that of democracy at large. “The media comes in only when the broader vision has been established and when they can explain it in terms of fundamental fairness.”

The mechanics of reaching the media are also important. Before approaching reporters for coverage, Rameau said he first insists on being able to answer some critical questions: What’s the news here? Why should the media care? So what?

The next step is to create an event that both illustrates the central issue and provides a “hook” for the news media. One way

is to stage a well-advanced press conference featuring individuals whose stories are deemed newsworthy. Even better, he said, is to provide the media with a dramatic demonstration of the issue in a way that has visual (for television and photo-journalists) and written (for newspaper journalists) appeal. He dubs such demonstrations as “street theater,” which, if true to the issue, rarely fails to attract attention.

In 2007 Rameau drew local and national media when a group he organized erected a shantytown overnight on a vacant lot in the Liberty City section of Miami, a predominantly poor and African American neighborhood. The lot had previously been the site of a public housing project that had been bulldozed years before, ostensibly to be replaced by newer buildings. The replacements never came, despite a deepening crisis in low-income housing in the city.

Tipped off by Rameau, reporters flocked to the shantytown to cover its creation and to tell the stories of the homeless people who occupied it—what Rameau would consider focusing attention on the “surface issue.” More important, the news media’s stories put pressure on city and county leaders to address the overarching issue of low-income housing—or the lack of it—throughout the community. The reaction was almost immediate as city and county politicians scrambled to promise speedy development of that site and others like it.

“The challenge is to be able to reduce a complex argument”—making publicly owned land available to meet public needs—“to a fundamental point about fairness,” the young activist said. “Then the media will come.”

Max Rameau’s blog is <http://takebacktheland.blogspot.com>.

GETTING TO KNOW THE MEDIA

To most people the news media is remote from their daily lives and as complex and inscrutable as Big Government. But while the

media is often perceived as monolithic, it appears in many shapes and sizes—and each of those forms plays some role in helping to bridge the distance between colossal institutions, such as the government, the business community, the entertainment world, organized religion, and everyday citizens. At least in theory, the media exists as a kind of filter—taking in new information from a variety of governmental and private sources; straining out irrelevant data, conjecture, speculation, and rumor; and providing the public with the remaining facts as news. Your efforts to solve the challenge you have identified hinge on your ability to persuade the media to present your story to its readers, viewers, and listeners.

Although some forms of media—such as the television network C-SPAN, which provides live coverage of Congress in action—show their subject without explanation or filtering, members of the media generally gather information by investigating and scrutinizing the subjects they cover and relaying those insights to the reading or viewing public. In this sense, the news media provides a layer of accountability through which citizens can evaluate the actions of various institutions and leading individuals in those institutions. For example, scandals abound in government, business, and entertainment—some with grave consequences, others of only passing importance.

Government. Over the past forty years the American public has been rocked by several major controversies and scandals—the occupation of Iraq, the Iran-contra affair, the Vietnam War, and Watergate—where presidential administrations were found to have abused their power. The news media exposed each of these events. Had *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein simply accepted the Nixon administration's explanations about Watergate, or had war correspondents not been present in Vietnam and Iraq to record the actual conditions on the ground, citizens would have had no better information about what happened in these situations than what the presidents in

question told them. Watergate would not have spawned major campaign finance reforms. U.S. military forces might have remained in Vietnam for decades, with tens of thousands more soldiers killed or wounded. But because we have an active and independent news media, Americans had the information they needed to demand that elected representatives take action.

Business. When the bottom fell out of several major U.S. business entities in the early 2000s—Enron Corporation, WorldCom, Tyco, and others—millions of shareholders lost their investments and hundreds of thousands of workers lost their jobs and their retirement savings. The business media uncovered the corporate malfeasance—insider trading, junk bonds, and accounting malpractice—that led to these financial calamities, and both investors and the public at large demanded action. Congress responded by enacting the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 to enhance corporate accountability.

Entertainment. The media is full of stories about the latest escapades of Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and Paris Hilton. In August 2007 an *Entertainment Weekly* cover story proclaimed that season as the “Summer of Scandal” in Hollywood.¹ Although there is no question that the paparazzi—mostly tabloid photographers trying to take the most lurid photographs possible—are a stain on the media landscape, the mainline entertainment press performs a valuable service: It gives consumers information that helps them decide which movie star or musician is going to receive their hard-earned dollars. When former *Seinfeld* costar Michael Richards, aka Kramer, launched a racist tirade during a stand-up comedy routine in late 2006, the public responded with outrage—but only after entertainment news sources chronicled his actions. In 2005 fans of megastar Tom Cruise had more insights into his character when he launched a direct-to-camera

¹ *Entertainment Weekly*, August 31, 2007.

assault on psychiatry, antidepressant medication, and actress Brooke Shields for her use of the latter to treat postpartum depression after the birth of her daughter.

Given the media's historic role in reporting news that can cast a less-than-favorable light on its subject matter, why would any person in his or her right mind risk any contact with reporters? The answer is simple: People who engage the media on a regular basis—public officials, candidates, business leaders, entertainers, active citizens—accept the risk of occasional negative coverage in exchange for access to a low-cost way to communicate their message to thousands or even millions of people. The media offers the same benefit to you. Whether the problem you identified after reading chapter 1 is a statewide issue (such as public education funding); a local issue (such as crime control); or a campus challenge (perhaps housing assignments), you are unlikely to persuade decision makers to address your problem unless you can rouse sufficient public attention. Nothing focuses a policymaker's attention on a problem quite like the prospect of scrutiny into his actions or inactions. Additionally, media coverage of your issue will alert potential allies and help you build the kind of coalition needed to bring about a solution to your problem.

I'll get to the question of how you can most effectively engage the media later in this chapter. First, let's look at the types of media with which you will need to interact if you want to increase public awareness about your issue. Each of these types—newspapers, television, radio, multicultural media, and the Internet—has unique advantages and disadvantages that you should keep in mind as you put together a media plan to focus awareness on the problem you have identified.

Newspapers

Newspapers have a long history of providing details of current and local events, and almost every community in the United States has a newspaper of some kind. Larger cities and towns tend to have

daily newspapers (examples are the *Sacramento Bee*, *Denver Post*, *Buffalo News*, and *Charlotte Observer*). Smaller communities often have weekly newspapers. Your college or university may have both. It is important to understand the differences between the two varieties in your efforts to attract newspaper coverage. Daily newspapers typically cover large geographical areas and thus a wide range of reader interests. Your “pitch” should mirror this broad coverage. In contrast, weekly newspapers usually have a narrow audience and view the news through a more parochial and personal lens. Adjust your approach accordingly.

Whatever their differences in scope and approach, most newspapers are organized along similar lines. A publisher has overall command, with ultimate oversight over the three main elements of the newspaper. The business side is primarily responsible for generating revenues through newspaper circulation and advertisement sales, as well as for managing costs to maintain a profitable and thus sustainable news organization. The news side consists of editors and reporters who produce news articles. The editorial side conveys the newspaper’s opinion on relevant issues of the day. For your purposes, you need be concerned only with the news and editorial functions.

The news staff generally has two types of personnel: reporters, who investigate and write the news stories that appear in the newspaper, and editors, who decide which subjects the newspaper will cover and carefully review and revise the articles that reporters submit for publication. Reporters are organized into “beats.” For example, at your daily newspaper, one reporter may be assigned to the police beat, to cover crime; another reporter has the schools beat and is responsible for education coverage; yet another follows municipal government on the City Hall beat; and so on. Pay close attention to which reporters are assigned to the various beats at your college or local newspaper: The reporter who covers your issue can be a valuable ally in introducing your cause to a wider audience.

When you begin your efforts to attract newspaper coverage of your issue, you will first approach a reporter who can produce a news story. But newspapers also have editorial boards that publish pieces giving the newspaper's stance on a particular subject (so-called editorials) and also pieces from professional columnists who analyze and comment on local or national news. Individuals are also given a chance to publish their own opinions (in op-ed pieces or letters to the editor). A newspaper's reporting staff and editorial board are separate and independent entities, a structure that you can use to generate both news and editorial coverage of your initiative.

As you strategize about your media plan, be mindful of the changing influence of newspaper coverage and its relative advantages and disadvantages as a news source. For most of American history, newspapers have been the dominant form of political and governmental media in the United States. In decades past, citizens who wanted to reach policymakers through the press had no choice but to work through newspaper reporters. But times have changed. The advent of broadcast news in the mid-twentieth century and its rapid expansion since then, as well as the more recent explosion of the Internet as a source of news and information, have changed the role of daily and weekly newspapers.

According to the 2008 biennial Pew Research Center for the People and the Press News Consumption Survey, only 34 percent of those polled had read a daily newspaper the day before the survey—down from 40 percent just two years before and way down from 58 percent in February 1994.² Although newspapers have recovered a small portion of their lost audience by establishing Internet sites offering online news, broadcast sources still have an advantage. For example, in the Pew survey, 57 percent of those surveyed reported having watched television news the day before.

² Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "2008 News Consumption and Believability Study," August 17, 2008, <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/444.pdf>.

The shift from print to broadcast and online sources has caused economic havoc in the newspaper industry. As former readers move to new sources of information, advertisers have followed them and significantly reduced their newspaper-based marketing. The global economic crisis of 2008 and 2009 accelerated this trend. As a result, newspapers have suffered huge reductions in revenue. In December 2008 the Tribune Company—which owns eight metropolitan newspapers including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Orlando Sentinel*, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, and *Hartford Courant*—filed for federal bankruptcy protection. One month later the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* did the same, and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* was put up for sale. In March 2009 the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* ceased personal home delivery of newspapers except on Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays. Even the *New York Times*, which has long been the gold standard for daily newspapers, announced in early 2009 that it was accepting a \$250 million loan from Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim Helù and mortgaging its Manhattan headquarters for up to \$225 million as it grappled with debt exceeding \$1 billion. In an effort to cut costs, many daily newspaper chains have either bought out or laid off large numbers of reporters and other news employees. Daily newspaper stories are increasingly generated not by local reporters but by national and statewide news sources, such as Associated Press (www.ap.org), Reuters (www.reuters.com), and Bloomberg News (www.Bloomberg.com).

Despite these financial troubles, the newspaper industry continues to look for new business models that will help daily print journalism survive. We should all hope they flourish, because newspapers offer great advantages to you in communicating your citizen message. The first is credibility. Newspapers are often seen as the medium most likely to “get it right” in terms of accuracy of reporting and fairness to their subjects. A comprehensive newspaper account will help to validate your initiative in the eyes of decision makers, possible coalition partners, and other reporters.

Another advantage is breadth of coverage. Unlike television and radio reporters, who may have two to three minutes of a thirty-minute broadcast to tell their stories, newspaper reporters have comparatively more room to provide a comprehensive account of the news item or issue in question. Although the facts you gather in support of your initiative will be helpful to any reporter, you are much more likely to see them published in a newspaper than aired by the broadcast media. Additionally, newspapers often shape other types of news coverage. Broadcast news directors often base their decisions on where to send their reporters on national and local newspaper headlines. A front-page story can produce a cascade effect across other media outlets in your community.

At your college or university the daily or weekly newspaper may be your primary or even exclusive source of campus news. You need to establish strong relationships with both reporters and editorial board members. But chances are good that since your fellow students are probably using television, radio, or the Internet to download state, national, and international news, they are also using those sources to learn about university issues.

Television

Television is the dominant source of news around the globe—the 800-pound gorilla of the media world. Its dominance cuts across socioeconomic lines. In the 2008 Pew survey, where 57 percent of those surveyed had used television as a source of news on the previous day, the number was even higher among certain demographic groups—for example, 59 percent of nonwhite Americans, including 68 percent of African Americans, and nearly 75 percent of people over the age of sixty-five. Families earning less than \$30,000 annually were almost as likely to watch television news as were those making more than \$100,000. College graduates and high school dropouts watched in relatively equal measure.

But television, like the media in general, is not monolithic. It consists of several levels of which you need to be aware as you

consider how to put your issue in the spotlight. The first level, and the one with which you are most likely to engage, is local television news (which includes campus television programming). Local television stations are referred to as network affiliates when they are affiliated with one of the national television networks (PBS, NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox, and CW). Some local stations are independent with no network affiliation.

Local TV news is best known for half-hour newscasts—usually aired sometime between 5:00 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. and then again between 10:00 p.m. and 11:30 p.m.—which provide summaries of the day's local news, weather, and sports. Although local television stations in big cities have larger staffs, almost every local station has a news director, who oversees the overall news operation; several news anchors, who present the news on set to the viewing public; news reporters, who cover general assignments; and an assignment editor, who directs news reporters to follow up on news tips or cover planned press events.

If you are watching Charles Gibson, Brian Williams, or Katie Couric present the news, you are watching national network news. Unless the problem you have identified has broad, national significance, and has attracted intense interest in Congress or at the White House, you will probably not work with them in airing your initiative.

Cable news is an increasingly popular form of television news coverage. Its mention immediately brings to mind Cable News Network (CNN), Fox News Channel (FNC), and Microsoft/NBC (MSNBC), but those national cable stations present the same problem as national network news. Unless your initiative has controversial national implications, they probably will not broadcast it. You face another problem in the fact that your name is not O. J. Simpson or Britney Spears.

However, more and more local cable systems are sponsoring “Headline News” style channels that provide local and regional news, weather, traffic, and sports twenty-four hours a day, seven

days a week. For example, Bright House Networks in the Tampa Bay area offers Bay News 9 (www.baynews9.com/Home.html) to its cable subscribers in a six-county region. In the Orlando area, Central Florida News 13—"All Local, All the Time"—performs the same service (www.cfnews13.com). Given the amount of air-time local cable stations have to fill, your issue might be of interest to a similar station if one exists in your community.

As with newspapers, television news offers its own set of advantages and challenges. The scope of television viewership is a major plus. Since Americans overwhelmingly prefer television as a news source, there is no better way to reach a large audience. Television news penetrates almost every household in the nation, including those in your community where citizens live who can bring pressure to bear on decision makers. The more your issue is aired and discussed, the more likely you are to bring about positive action.

Although television remains the best way to communicate with a mass audience, that reach comes with trade-offs in the form of reduced depth and credibility. With limited time available (after commercials, twenty-two to twenty-three minutes of a thirty-minute broadcast), local television reports rarely last more than two or three minutes. That is hardly enough time to introduce, never mind fully present, the challenge you have identified and the solutions you are proposing. The 24/7 local cable stations offer another opportunity for broadcast coverage, but they also present news according to a strict format that does not usually allow in-depth reporting. Local TV stations are notorious for prioritizing stories about murder and mayhem over other subject matter—hence the saying, "If it bleeds, it leads." Cable news has come under increased scrutiny for its breathless coverage of celebrity scandal, and what news it does show is sometimes tainted by allegations of bias (for example, the charge that Fox News Channel is too conservative and CNN is too liberal to be reliable).

If your campus or local community has one or more television stations that provide news coverage, make an effort to build

relationships with each station's news director and key reporters. Use the suggestions in "Persuading the Press," later in this chapter, to convince them that your citizen initiative deserves television coverage. Remember that they don't have the airtime to provide all of the details; it's your job to help them craft stories that can be told in 180 seconds or less.

Radio

Radio may seem an anachronism—a medium that once filled the role that television now plays in our media culture. Recent statistics don't help that impression. According to the 2008 Pew survey, only 35 percent of those interviewed had listened to the radio for news the day before they were polled. That number is substantially down from a 49 percent response in a similar 1998 survey. However, radio remains a potent source of news and commentary. With Americans spending significant time in their cars, millions listen to radio each day. Radio news generally falls into three categories. NPR (National Public Radio); statewide public radio networks; and national, state, and local radio news and talk shows.

The first category, NPR (www.npr.org), provides a variety of programming, including the drive-time national news shows "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered." In 2008 nearly 25 percent of Americans reported listening regularly or semiregularly to NPR and its network of affiliate stations across the nation. More important for your purposes, individual NPR affiliates in metropolitan areas are often associated with a college or university and are sometimes located on campus. These local NPR stations often provide a steady diet of regional news updates throughout the day. They may give you an opportunity to have your issue aired if you communicate with the station's news director or news reporters.

The second radio news category consists of national and state radio networks that provide regular news updates throughout the programming day for stations that pay for their services. If you listen to your favorite FM station and hear a brief news report at

the top or middle of the hour from ABC Radio News or Florida News Network, you are hearing one of these quick national or state news broadcasts. As is the case with network television news, you are unlikely to interact with these types of radio news unless your issue is controversial or of statewide interest.

But the radio news landscape has increasingly come to be defined by the third category: news/talk networks and programs. In the past two decades, national talk show hosts, such as Rush Limbaugh, Neal Boortz, Glenn Beck, and Michael Savage, who present consistently right-wing views, have become household names. Talk show hosts on the other side politically include Ed Schultz, Bill Press, and Stephanie Miller. Local radio news/talk shows have sprung up in the image of these national programs in media markets across the country. Although talk radio no longer has the audience it did in the mid-1990s, when 45–50 percent of Americans regularly or sometimes listened, the 2008 Pew survey showed the regular or sometimes listenership at 40 percent. Any news source heard at least some of the time by four of every ten Americans is worth your time.

Although the programs in this medium do not present the news so much as they comment on it, they attract millions of listeners who in effect use the shows as a source of news. Whether your local radio news/talk station is based on campus or covers the entire local community, you can use it to shape discussion of your issue once it has been introduced into the public arena.

Regardless of the form of radio that is appropriate for your campaign, keep in mind that it has its own pluses and minuses as an information source. Its wide scope is a major advantage. However, it is not always ideal, especially in terms of reach, depth, and credibility. As evidenced by the 2008 Pew survey, radio faces a declining share of the overall news market. Like television, it has limited time available to give airtime to the problem you have identified and the solutions you are proposing. Unless you can convince your local NPR affiliate to produce a comprehensive

feature story on your subject, your chances of extensive radio coverage are slim. Finally, although NPR and its affiliates and other national and state public radio networks win high marks for credibility, news/talk programs do not because many come with an inherent political bias.

As you organize the media effort for your initiative, plan to visit your campus radio station, local NPR affiliate, and any talk radio stations in your area and make contact with key reporters, anchors, and hosts. See if your community or state has a radio news station or network not affiliated with NPR that may provide coverage of your initiative. Finally, build a team of supporters who can call into local talk radio shows and create buzz about your concern. If you can find a talk radio host who has particular influence with the policymakers you want to influence—such as a popular conservative to whom Republican lawmakers listen—you may want to see if you can convince that host to champion your cause on air.

Multicultural Media

Increasingly, our nation's unique diversity is reflected in the news media. Throughout the United States, Hispanic, African American, and other multicultural newspapers, radio stations, television stations, and Web sites are integral members of the media. In New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, Chicago, and other major media markets, Spanish-language television and radio stations—either independent or affiliated with a major network such as Telemundo or Univision—consistently have some of the largest audiences and highest ratings. African American networks like Black Entertainment Television and local African American newspapers and broadcast stations also hold significant sway. In some areas, other groups (for example, Haitian Americans in South Florida) have media outlets of their own in which they can discuss community issues.

If your community enjoys this kind of media diversity, include these news sources on your target list. Analyze your issue

to determine if it will particularly affect the community you are targeting, and build relationships with those newspapers and stations. Your outreach will make a difference with key segments of the overall audience you hope to reach.

The Internet and Blogs

At the time of the Pew survey in 2008, the Internet still paled as a news source compared with newspapers, television, and radio. According to the poll, 29 percent of those surveyed received news online on the day prior to the poll. While that is a smaller percentage than for daily print or broadcast sources, the real story in these numbers is the increased use of online news. From 1998 to 2008 the number of people in the general public who went online for news at least three times a week increased from 13 percent to 37 percent. Since the 2006 version of the biennial Pew survey, the number of Americans going online for news daily increased approximately one-third, from 18 percent to 25 percent. As more and more people, especially younger people, use Internet search engines to find news stories, spend time on blogs to comment on the news, and read online newspaper sites, the Internet continues to grow as a news source.

The stunning decline of the newspaper industry has heightened the influence of online news. Most newspapers are looking for profitable ways to transition from the traditional printed edition—which comes with huge operating costs in the form of printing presses and employees required to operate the machinery—to a sleeker, more cost-effective online model. Although the shift from printed to online articles will not significantly change your basic approach to newspaper reporters, it may mean that fewer reporters are still employed at your local daily and available to cover your initiative. You'll have to work harder and be more creative to attract their interest. On the other hand, the change in model means that news sources like AP, Reuters, and Bloomberg News will have even more influence than they do now. Even if your issue is a campus or local community

matter, you may need to engage statewide news sources more than you would have during the heyday of newspapers.

The most profound revolution in the use of Internet sources for news, however, is the blog. Until the mid-2000s blogs were few and far between. Now blogs are everywhere. Most follow the same format: A blogger posts a story or opinion on a subject and invites fellow bloggers to respond with comment. This invitation usually leads to a stream of back-and-forth on the issue posted and may even produce online discussion of other subjects.

Blogs are important to your initiative for three reasons. First, the sheer number of blogs means that bloggers are hungry to report stories like yours. Second, as newspapers reduce their reporting staffs, blogs are assuming more of the responsibility for original reporting, some of which the traditional press later picks up as newsworthy. Third, blogs were designed in a way to attract the attention of Web search engines. If someone searches Google, Yahoo, or another search engine for a particular issue, he or she will quickly encounter blogs that reference that issue.

Blogs that primarily discuss government or politics fall into three main categories. Some are derived from existing news media outlets. Examples are the *Washington Post's* political news blog "The Fix" (<http://blog.washingtonpost.com/thefix>), the *St. Petersburg Times's* "Buzz Blog" (<http://blogs.tampabay.com/buzz>), the *Chicago Tribune's* "The Swamp" (www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog), the *New York Times's* "The Caucus" (<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com>), and the *Wall Street Journal's* "Capital Journal" (<http://blogs.wsj.com/capitaljournal>). For these types of blogs, reporters post news stories, videos, and opinion columns and encourage reaction from their audiences. Other newspapers across the nation, possibly including the one you read, host similar news blogs.

Others are ideologically based. For example, the left-leaning Daily Kos (www.DailyKos.com) advertises itself as a "daily weblog with political analysis of US current events from a political perspective." RedState (www.redstate.com) calls itself a center-of-right

blog. Your local community undoubtedly has several blogs from a variety of ideological perspectives that discuss the news of the day.

Engaging these blogs is more about becoming a part of their community. Most of the ideological sites allow users to create “diaries,” or individualized blogs. Create one and engage directly. Post comments and participate in the existing discussion. Then, when you have a news story that you want DailyKos or RedState or another blog to cover, the goodwill you have established may help your pitch succeed. Finally, keep in mind that most ideological bloggers are half-journalist, half-activist. Conduct research and identify those bloggers who are already talking about your issue or a related issue. If they’re already active in your space, you should be able to persuade them to discuss your initiative.

Others blogs are issue oriented, focusing their attention on a single policy matter or related set of issues. For example, the Health Care Blog (www.thehealthcareblog.com) defines itself as “Everything you ever wanted to know about health care but were afraid to ask.” Great Education Colorado (www.greateducation.org), a grassroots organization, has established a blog to generate discussion about the state’s public education system. Energy Outlook (<http://energyoutlook.blogspot.com>) harnesses commentary on various power-related issues.

Even more so than talk radio, blogs are an extremely accessible information source: Anyone with a computer and Internet access can contribute to a blog discussion. This lack of filters (such as reporters, editorial writers, radio call screeners, and the like) helps to explain why blogs are an increasingly popular way of sharing information. But the same accessibility also generates concerns about their reliability. Because traditional reporters have to verify information before they print or air it, the printed or televised news is often seen as much more likely to be accurate. On a blog, even if the original post is reliable, the resulting commentary is not always perceived to be dependable. However, many of the most widely read and established blogs take their credibility very

seriously. They have their own editorial processes, writers, and retraction policies. On some of the major blogs, for example, writers are required to strike through mistakes and make corrections on the original story.

Policymakers are increasingly paying attention to blogs as a way to keep their finger on the pulse of public opinion. Although bloggers are not yet a representative sample of the entire community, they tend to be more active in public affairs than is the average citizen. A blogger is more likely to provide small donations to political campaigns, send e-mails to local elected officials, stoke the fires of a controversial issue, and send out mass communications over the Internet.

Don't ignore the blog culture as you seek to raise awareness about your initiative. Take advantage of its growing influence by establishing your own blog about the problem you are trying to solve. Visit other blogs to create sympathetic diaries, encourage discussion about your issue, and direct bloggers to your blog. In so doing, you may help to build a core of committed online allies who can help spread the word about your challenge and proposed solutions.

PERSUADING THE PRESS: DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING YOUR MEDIA PLAN

In 2007 a Pew Research Center survey on public perceptions of the press found that, by 69 percent to 23 percent, Americans believed that the news media is “often influenced by powerful people and organizations,” rather than being “pretty independent.”³ In other words, the news media appears to most Americans to be a tool available primarily to the elite and the powerful, not the champion of ordinary people with their everyday concerns.

³Ibid., “Views of Press Values and Performance, 1985–2007,” August 9, 2007, <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/348.pdf>.

Unfortunate as it may be, there is some basis for this view, despite the fact that most journalists want to give a voice to the powerless and stand ready to take up worthy causes. To repeat that well-worn phrase, what we have here is a failure to communicate.

As the Pew survey shows, the major news media all too often fails to show a welcoming face to outsiders. But contrary to that perception, the media is neither impenetrable nor a tool exclusively of the elite. With some basic planning and a better understanding of how to attract press interest, you can use the media to advance your citizen agenda and promote solutions to the challenges you have identified. Try the following steps to engage the attention of the media.

1. Know Your Goals, Message, and Media Audience

The worst possible way to engage the media is a backward “Fire . . . Ready . . . Aim” approach. Before you even begin to think about which reporters you might contact, you need to decide how you want the media coverage to benefit your cause. Are you simply trying to bring an issue to light because a decision maker is keeping it in the dark? Are you trying to sway administrators or legislators in advance of an important decision or vote? Do you want to identify others who share your concerns and build a strong coalition? Is your goal to alert the general public about a problem that they should be aware of but are not? Do you hope to build support for a particular piece of legislation that would solve your problem? Are you belatedly attempting to rebut the public arguments your opponent has already made? Think carefully about what you want your media campaign to accomplish, and stay focused on that goal in all of your upcoming interactions with the media.

But simply articulating a media goal is not sufficient. You must also develop a basic message, one that can be summarized in a single sentence. For example, assume that a wave of violent night-time muggings has spread through your college community and students are afraid to walk through campus after dark.

Angered by what you feel is a lackadaisical response from the administration and local authorities, you want to use the media to stir public outrage and force action. Your every interaction with the media—whether through newspapers, television, radio, or the Internet—must drive home the same message: The crime spree has put students, faculty, staff, and community members who walk across campus at risk, and the university administration and local law enforcement officials must eliminate the danger.

After you develop your basic message, consider which members of the media are best suited to help you convey it. Marshall McLuhan, who many have called the father of the electronic age, explained this conceptualization in a now-famous phrase: “The medium is the message.” Some stories are visual in nature—a house crushed by a fallen tree, a hurricane battering a beach, a SWAT team storming a suspected crack den, a rat-infested government apartment complex. These stories make compelling television.

However, other important stories lack a live, visual dimension. For example, it may be hard for television to present a comprehensive account of a major government decision or conduct an investigative report into government misspending. These stories could be page-one features in your newspaper, but they will do little to excite a television viewer’s interest. How is your story best told? Is it visual? If so, a television journalist is likely to be receptive to doing that story. On the other hand, if telling your story requires a reporter to dig through government records or privately interview many people who don’t want public attention, it may be best suited for the newspaper or the Internet.

2. Do Your Homework

Once you have settled on a message and analyzed which medium—it could be more than one—will help you effectively communicate that

message, identify specific reporters who can best help you talk to the public at large.

For example, if you have decided to target print sources, try to match reporters with their beats so that you can identify those who are likely to be most receptive to your concerns. Many newspapers, from national dailies to your campus newspaper, now list reporters and their beats on the paper's Internet site. If you can't find them there, look for recent articles on your issue and identify the reporter assigned to that beat by looking for the byline. If all else fails, telephone the newspaper's newsroom and simply ask which reporter is assigned to your beat. You can repeat the same process to discover which member of the newspaper's editorial staff is responsible for writing about your issue.

The set-up for broadcast reporters is similar, although only a few are as highly specialized as their print counterparts. Moreover, most television and radio stations do not have nearly enough news personnel to staff a full beat system. In most cases, you'll want to start with the news director or assignment editor and have that person guide you to the correct reporter. If your local television stations are among the few that still broadcast editorials—a station's position on an issue usually presented by its general manager or editorial director—contact the stations and arrange a meeting with the appropriate personnel. As for the Internet, you may find Web-based publications as well as local, state, and perhaps even national blogs that write about your issue.

3. Walk a Mile in the Media's Shoes

After you have identified the reporter (or reporters) you want to approach, take time to wire yourself into their brains before you make contact. Put yourself in the place of a journalist who is learning about your issue for the first time. Ask these questions: What makes this a story of community interest? How would I tell

it? Why is this newsworthy? Why should other people care? If you can't answer these issues on your own, you're going to have a hard time convincing a reporter that your story is news.

Don't limit yourself to questions a generic journalist might ask. Review this particular reporter's previous stories on the subject and see if you can detect a common thread. For example, if your goal is to expose a property insurance company that is illegally denying claims, it would help to know if the reporter you want to target has previously investigated insurance claims practices of any kind. What has he or she written about property insurance carriers?

If you have thought through the general and specific interests in your story, you're ready to approach the reporters who can help you convey your message to the public. But don't go empty-handed. Instead, rely on a phrase that is a fundamental precept of journalism: "Show me; don't tell me." To focus the news media's attention on your issue, gather supporting information, line up contacts, or provide helpful leads. The more tangible information you can provide, the more likely the reporter will write your story. For example, in the case of the campus safety issue mentioned earlier, if you were able to put the reporter in touch with robbery victims who could describe their harrowing experiences, and also provided minutes from administration meetings that demonstrated a heel-dragging response, you would likely greatly enhance the reporter's interest in the issue.

Don't wait until you're about to engage the media to collect supporting information. As you employ the research methods described in chapter 2, consider how the data you have already gathered might be useful to a reporter. But don't just focus on the past—envision and pursue new lines of research that could result in positive press coverage.

Especially when you are working with television reporters, it helps to take this proactive approach one step further and create

the powerful visual images they need to tell your story. You should not manufacture news. But it makes sense to present your concerns in a setting that is visually compelling. For example, if you want to focus attention on your state's chronic underfunding of its public universities, bring television reporters to campus so that they can film and talk with students forced to stand in overcrowded lecture halls. Walk them to the registrar's office and introduce them to seniors frantic with worry because the courses they need to graduate aren't being offered.

Finally, as you stick carefully to your basic message, think about which applications of that message might catch a reporter's interest. The media values the good of the many over the good of the few—or of the one—and reporters are most likely to take up the causes of people to whom most others in their audience can relate. They are not inclined to act as an advocate for an individual whose concerns aren't widely shared by others. For example, a job seeker who loses out to a rival isn't likely to persuade a TV reporter to make that story the subject of the evening news. But if that job seeker was rejected because of his race and not his qualifications—and there is evidence to that effect—that's newsworthy. Suddenly this isn't about one person's grievance; it's a matter of group discrimination, which most people won't tolerate.

4. Make Contact

Become a person to journalists, not just the faceless author of a text message or a voice mail. Once you've identified the reporters most likely to be interested in your issue, find a way to communicate directly with them. An e-mail may crack the door, but barely. A phone conversation is better, perhaps followed by an e-mail. Best of all is a face-to-face meeting followed by an e-mail summarizing your key points.

Don't stop with reporters. Find out who oversees the reporters who cover the subject area in which you're interested. In many

newspapers the names and contact information for supervising editors are printed on the front page of the relevant sections. Again, send an e-mail, make a phone call or, if possible, schedule an in-person appointment. Remember to be specific about the subject and emphasize why you believe your story is newsworthy. Building independent relationships with editors is important for another reason: Individual reporters come and go, frequently moving from beat to beat. Editors are more likely to stay in one place and can be the key to an ongoing relationship.

As you discovered in chapter 6, timing is everything—and that precept is no less true when you are dealing with reporters. The pace of a news reporter's day generally accelerates as the day goes on. So if you want to make initial contact with a reporter, do it during a "slow" part of the day. For most reporters, the later in the day it is, the more hectic things become as deadlines close in for the evening television news, the drive-home radio, or the morning newspaper. Think also in terms of when your story would receive the most (or least) attention. Weekday news will normally have a larger audience than weekend coverage. Because readership, viewership, and listenership have traditionally been down at the end of the week, government officials and companies often release bad news late on Friday. Timing is also a question of context. If your concern is that the university has not allocated enough football tickets to students, you may want to raise that issue with the news media in the week before the season starts.

If a reporter is not able to cover your initiative right away, don't worry. Be patient. Some matters require lengthy investigation. For other matters, at least in the opinion of the news media, the timing isn't right for your story to be told. This example may sound familiar: Some citizens warned for years that punch-card ballot machines disenfranchised many voters in every election. They had the data and the evidence to back up their allegations and to support their demands for new machines. But only when

the result in the 2000 presidential election was too close to call in Florida were those machines discredited and ultimately replaced.

5. Take Multiple Bites at the Apple

Even when a reporter has written or broadcast your story, don't consider your work done. That initial media coverage is usually just a launching pad for additional press interest. When the daily newspaper publishes a story about your initiative, immediately contact local radio and television stations and interested Internet sources and blogs to provide copies of the article. If you can also provide them with facts, people to interview, and compelling audio and visual depictions of your message, your story may start off in the morning papers and end up on the evening news and all over the Internet. The reverse is also true. In this era of new media, your first hit may occur on a blog before more traditional sources pick up the story.

Additionally, don't forget that media outlets often offer more than one avenue to print coverage. Once your story becomes news, ask for a meeting with the editorial writer responsible for the issue. Persuade him or her that the newspaper should adopt your position as its own. If you are successful, the paper may produce a favorable editorial that validates your cause as you seek allies, funding, and even more media attention. Similarly, contact your local TV stations if they still broadcast editorials.

Finally, take advantage of opportunities to argue your case using your own words. In addition to publishing the opinions of syndicated columnists (writers like George Will, David Broder, and Ellen Goodman) whose work appears in newspapers across the nation and world, and local columnists who write primarily for a particular newspaper, newspaper editorial pages often reserve space for op-ed pieces where policymakers, community leaders, and everyday citizens can express their views on a particular issue—usually in about 600 words. Once your initiative has become a news story, a published op-ed in which you argue your position

can not only extend the life of the story but also generate public discussion. Conversely, if reporters have not yet paid significant attention to your cause or issue, an op-ed can help you present it to the public directly. If the newspaper won't publish your op-ed, drop down to the smaller size (150–300 words) letter to the editor to express your views.

6. Stay Credible at All Costs

Never exaggerate, lie, or deceive, even by omission. Chances are that a good journalist will discover the deception and your credibility will be forever damaged. When that happens, your chances of engaging the media on this or any other issue will be gone.

Additionally, remember that you are pursuing this initiative to be a good citizen, not to supplement your income. News isn't for sale. Ask for nothing in return, even if your story has potential as a blockbuster. Reputable journalists will not pay for news. Those that do pay, such as supermarket tabloids, generally have little credibility with the public, just as a paid police snitch has little credibility with a jury. The converse of this is to never offer to pay or to provide gifts to a journalist in exchange for reporting on your issue. A reputable journalist will consider such offers—even if made in good faith—as tantamount to bribes.

7. Distribute Your Own Message

Traditional media outlets serve as a filter of sorts between newsmakers and the general public. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Internet has given citizens more direct access to making, reporting, and reacting to news than at any other time in history. Take advantage of these unique opportunities. Box 8-1 explains how you can communicate directly with supporters and the general public through your own Web site and Internet program.

Tips from the Pros: Putting Your Grassroots Campaign on the Internet

JOSH KOSTER

1. *Forget the hype.* Most news reports about the use of the Internet in politics focus on the exceptions to the rule—Howard Dean, Ron Paul, Barack Obama, and other high-profile candidates whose fame allowed them to use the Internet in revolutionary ways. Don't try to replicate those efforts as you establish your own Internet program. You can't. Instead, your goal should be to use the Internet to make your campaign or initiative more efficient—giving you faster research, better fundraising, and enhanced communications capabilities. Period. If you are hell-bent on trying all sorts of "new approaches" or discovering the next big innovation, you will lose sight of your real needs and probably fail in your campaign.

2. *Make your Web site a hub for supporters.* Citizens who visit campaign Web sites tend to be politically engaged in general or personally engaged with your initiative. Either way you need to communicate with them throughout your campaign and encourage them to share those messages with others. Design every part of your Web site with the goal of enticing would-be supporters to provide contact information so that you can keep them engaged. In other words, make sure that your e-mail sign-up form and action items (volunteer, donate, or host) are big, noticeable, above the fold, and on every single page.

3. *Remember that good content matters.* Give Web site visitors something worthwhile to read. This means using eye-catching graphics and putting effort into your issue positions from the first time you draft them. Invest in a Web site that can be easily updated so that your campaign team can change the site and keep visitors coming back to see new content.

4. *Promote your Web site.* This isn't *Field of Dreams*. Even if you build it, there is no guarantee they will come. The Internet is a big place, and your job is to make sure people find the site. Ask every

blogger who writes a good story about your initiative to add a link to the site. Post links in the comments fields of articles related to your campaign. Purchase cost-effective Internet advertisements to drive traffic to the site. Instruct your candidate or spokespeople to hype the Web site at every public appearance.

5. *Build good lists.* The Internet provides users with unprecedented opportunities to communicate with others. But the key word is *others*. Your campaign can have the best message ever crafted, but it won't matter if you fail to build a constantly expanding list of e-mail addresses to receive that message. Make this an all-hands-on-deck operation. Instruct your fundraisers to collect e-mail addresses from donors and potential donors. Put your field organizers in charge of doing the same with volunteers. Ask your coalition partners to gather e-mails from their networks. As more and more people learn about your initiative, visit your Web site, and take an interest in your cause, they will encourage others to do so—and your e-mail list will grow even more.

6. *Respect your e-mail subscribers.* Communicate with subscribers only when you have something worthwhile to report or have a significant request to make. Nobody likes frivolous or pointless e-mails; so yours better be important. Never, ever, under any circumstances, send an e-mail because it has been a long time since you last sent one.

7. *Invest in a good bulk e-mail program.* These programs are dirt cheap and help your communications avoid spam filters. The better bulk-mail programs also provide valuable information—the number of intended recipients who opened your e-mails, clicked on links in your e-mail, and forwarded your e-mail. These metrics help you determine which issues motivated your supporters the most and which actions you should ask them to take.

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CHECKLIST FOR ACTION

- Know your goals, message, and media audience.
- Do your homework.
- Walk a mile in the media's shoes.
- Make contact.
- Take multiple bites at the apple.
- Stay credible at all costs.
- Distribute your own message.

Exercises

MEDIA SAVVY

Identify a citizen in your community (college campus, town, county, or state) who has advanced her policy goals through effective interaction with the media. Interview her and determine how she persuaded newspaper, broadcast, or Internet reporters to take an interest in her issue, and how that engagement has affected her initiative. Present your findings in class.

THE NEWS IN PRINT

Call a local newspaper editorial writer to visit your class and explain what influences the newspaper's editorial opinions. Ask him how the newspaper determines which op-eds and letters to the editor to publish.

Following his presentation, write an op-ed (no more than 600 words) arguing the case for your citizen initiative and submit it to the newspaper for consideration. Your professor might provide extra credit if the op-ed appears in print.

THE MESSAGE AND THE BEAT

Consider the problem you identified early in our work together. How could media attention help to solve that problem? Develop

a basic message about the challenge that you want the general public to understand. Which of the media—print, television, radio, or Internet—are best suited to help you convey that message and why? Be prepared to discuss.

For whatever issue you have chosen, identify the beat reporter for your campus newspaper (if applicable) and for the local daily or weekly newspaper. Call the campus radio station, the local NPR affiliate, and each of the local television stations and determine the name and contact information for their respective news directors, assignment editors, and key reporters. Determine if local, state, or national bloggers or other Internet outlets are discussing the issue online.