



The Ruckus Society

Media Training Manual

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Introduction: How to Work Miracles

Coordinating media for a direct action is more art than science, and sometimes owes more to luck than either. News is a quirky, complicated, unpredictable endeavor - much like an action itself. Put the two together, and it can seem like a miracle when an action actually communicates the intended message to the desired audience. As media coordinator, your job is to work miracles.

There's no formula for working miracles, but there are certain steps you can take that will greatly increase your chances of coverage. You have to stay flexible and willing to do whatever works, but following the basics will put you in position to respond most effectively if you have to change course.

Much about media work, up to the point when the action finally goes down, is tedious, exacting, and detail-oriented. (Then it's exciting as hell.) But if you ignore the fundamentals, you're giving the news media - who are already naturally disposed to regard activists as naive amateurs - one more reason to ignore your action.

This chapter includes a checklist of what you should do, and when you should do it, to have the best shot at getting your action's message out. But these steps can be for naught if not done with thorough professionalism - **journalists are professional cynics, and if you're sloppy they will notice it, and it will color their coverage. So go the extra mile; proofread the press release again; make the extra phone call. Never cut corners.**

And always remember this advice from Wes "Scoop" Nisker, a legendary counterculture journalist of the '60s: "If you don't like the news, go out and make it yourself."

How the News Media Works (Or Doesn't)

The structure of the U.S. and global news media is undergoing rapid change - change that may soon make outdated the concept of news (as opposed to entertainment or other "soft" information media).

Much of this change stems from the trend toward media conglomerates - vast empires that may include a chain of papers, lifestyle magazines, radio and TV stations, a cable network, a movie studio, a book division and an online service. News outlets are no longer run as public trusts with a unique responsibility to society, but as pure consumer products, marketed like soft drinks. (In the news business, cities aren't cities any more; they're "markets.")



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As recently as the 1970s, newspapers dominated news coverage, with TV and radio playing catch-up on whatever stories the papers broke. No more.

Go into any newspaper these days, and you'll find the editors keeping a close watch on a bank of TV sets tuned to local newscasts and CNN. With the exception of a few prestigious national papers - **The New York Times**, **The Wall Street Journal**, **The Washington Post** and **the Los Angeles Times** - U.S. papers are driven by the same values that prevail on TV: short, simple, reader-friendly reports, heavy on crime and celebrities. (More on these trends can found in Ben Bagdikian's invaluable **The Media Monopoly**.)

Still, it does no good to whine. If you want to reach a mainstream audience, learn to work with the media structure as it exists.

Wire Services

In the U.S. there are three main wire services: the Associated Press, United Press International and Reuters. AP is by far the dominant player, with UPI struggling with near-bankruptcy in recent decades and Reuters, based in Britain, still building its American base.

Each has its quirks, but all wire services are alike in one way: Almost all reporting is done by phone, with very few reporters available to go to the scene of a breaking story. They must work fast - they have a deadline every minute - and their stories aren't very long, so the more skilled you are in concisely and accurately describing your action over the phone, the better.

Wire services also offer a great opportunity for getting coverage even when no reporters show up: If you have a reasonably skilled photographer on hand, he or she can take an action photo and offer it to the wires as a freelancer. If it's an interesting breaking-news photo, the wires often aren't that picky about who took it.

AP reaches nearly everywhere, and seems to have reporters everywhere as well. Dozens of major American cities, and all state capitals, boast AP bureaus, and smaller cities and towns usually have an AP "stringer" - typically, a reporter for the local paper. In most metropolitan markets, AP also circulates the Daybook, a listing of news events happening that day, consulted religiously by all other news outlets. **The Daybook is a great place to get a press conference or demonstration listed - send a press release a day in advance to "Daybook Editor," then call to confirm - but obviously, you don't publicize a direct action this way.**



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UPI's remaining strengths are two: Its reporters, although harried, are often more accessible to unusual stories; and a majority of its remaining clients are radio stations. In some states, UPI operates its own radio network.

In Europe, **REUTERS** is as dominant as AP is in America. For now, U.S. papers use it as a secondary service, often emphasizing business news. But if your action has an international angle - for example, stopping a shipment of rainforest plywood - there's a good chance Reuters will move a story. (In the largest markets, check also for bureaus of other foreign services, such as Japan's Jiji Press. Anytime you're doing an action against an international corporation, make sure you get word to the press in the company's home country.)

Many cities now have a **LOCAL WIRE SERVICE** - City News Bureau in Chicago, Bay City News in San Francisco - that covers stories the big papers and TV stations don't have time to get to. They also publish daybooks.

Newspapers

Conglomeration is shrinking the number of dailies, so that most cities support only one main metropolitan paper. There are very few afternoon papers left, so newspapers are often reporting stories broken the day before by TV and radio. This can work against action coverage - what seems exciting on live radio or TV may be shrugged off by the newspaper as old news.

As breaking stories, actions are usually covered by a general assignments (GA) reporter. GAs are versatile, but don't expect them to know much about environmental issues. They'll focus more on the police aspects of the action - what laws are you breaking, who got arrested - all the more reason to refine and deliver a simple, unmistakable message.

Is a picture worth a thousand words? Yes: A dramatic newspaper photo of your action will draw many more readers than an article - and the wire services may pick it up and move it around the world.

An essential step in planning your action is to work backwards from the photograph you'd like to see in the next day's paper. (This imagery should ideally translate well to television.) Ask yourself: If the only coverage of this action is one wire service photo, what single image will best convey our message? Consider everything: lighting, camera angle, visibility of the target, size of the banner, even the clothes your activists are wearing. In the absence of a banner, effective messages can be delivered by symbolic costumes.



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Radio

News radio is in some ways the most desirable coverage for an action. It's live and dramatic; during morning and afternoon "drive time" it reaches large, captive audiences; and radio reporters live for catchy soundbites (as opposed to TV reporters, who value good video footage.) **These days, equipping your activists onsite with a cellular phone is a must: News radio loves those "live from the scene of the action" interviews.**

Most cities now have one or two all-news stations, but a lot of music formats also do local news. (In a number of markets, alternative rock stations promote a "green" image, and will give environmental actions prominent and favorable coverage.)

All-news stations generally belong to one of the national radio networks - ABC, CBS or Mutual. The networks' staff are almost all based in New York, but for an action with national impact you should call them.

News reports on commercial radio are quite short - a minute or less. More thorough are the non-commercial stations and networks, including National Public Radio (NPR) and Pacifica Radio News.

NPR, supported in part with tax dollars, has, to the general public, a liberal image. Activists joke that it stands for National Pentagon, or National Petroleum, Radio. Still, NPR stations tend to take local news seriously, and the network is one of the more thoughtful and objective national news operations. They and their audience are interested in the environment. (NPR is the main source of news for contributors to Greenpeace.)

PACIFICA is unlike any other news operation in America. It's a string of six listener-supported stations (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Washington and Houston) with an unabashedly leftist viewpoint. The production values and reporting skill may lag, but the audiences are sizable, and KPFA (Berkeley) and (WBAI) New York put on credible news shows.

Television

The most famous description of American TV is "a vast wasteland" - and that was 40 years ago. Now it's much worse: A study by Rocky Mountain Media Watch found that the average local TV station runs so much mayhem and fluff - crime, disaster, pets, sex, showbiz - there's almost no time for real news. The networks are more serious, but focus heavily on Washington politics. Still, a creative, timely direct action with good visuals can get coverage - and the vast wasteland has a vast audience.



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LOCAL TV:

Very few local television stations, even in the largest cities, have reporters assigned specifically to cover the environment - or any other specialized topic, for that matter. Almost all TV reporters are generalists and, while exceptions do exist, employed more for their hair than for reporting ability.

Add to this the fact that TV reporters are often assigned to cover two or even three stories a day, forcing them to race from story to story with only the most cursory research and preparation. You'll begin to see why local TV news is so shallow - forcing you, the activist, to make your message as simple and easily understood as possible in order to have any chance at accurate coverage.

The gatekeeper at the local station - the person to whom you want to get your press release and make your pitch - is the news assignment editor. But since this is TV, it's not enough to have a relevant story and coherent soundbites. TV needs pictures - preferably pictures of people in action.

A creative direct action should, of course, provide such pictures - but even that's not enough unless it's staged well. Choose a setting for your action that's not only visually interesting, but also symbolizes your issue. For example, if you're protesting a federal law that prohibits citizens from filing appeals against off-shore drilling, stage your action on the steps of the US courthouse. But if your main message is the irresponsibility of the company responsible for the drilling, take your action to company headquarters.

Here are some other ways to add visual interest to your direct action:

- Banners, of course. Banners should not only express your message, but should be designed for easy reading at a distance. This means that not only should all the colors and symbols used be legible, but the banner itself must be big enough to be seen against whatever backdrop you're hanging it on.
- Clothing. Sometimes, what your activists are wearing can tell the story as well or better than a banner. For example, for a protest at a toxics facility or nuclear dump, dress everyone in haz-mat suits. If you're raising hell at a stockholder's meeting, dress up as caricatures of fat-cat capitalists. Or skip the banner altogether, and have your message spelled out in letters on the protesters' t-shirts.

THE NETWORKS:

Much of what we just said about local TV applies also to the networks - although, thankfully, national news broadcasts tend to have somewhat less fluff and filler than their local affiliates, and reporters may actually have time to research a story. **But because the networks have only 22 minutes a day to cover the world (or pretend to), it's much**



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less likely that they will cover a direct action as breaking news. You may see a snippet of an action included as part of a larger feature story on the issue, or a very brief mention of an action that made international news. But in such instances, the networks are most likely to have gotten their footage from a local affiliate. Therefore, concentrate on getting your action covered by local TV, but send press releases and make follow-up calls to the networks and let them know a local affiliate was present. If they want the footage, they'll let the affiliate know.

CABLE:

The great exception to the rules of local and network TV is, of course, Cable News Network. **CNN has an enormous news hole to fill - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year** - so if your action features a relevant message and good visuals, it has a pretty good chance of getting on.

Although CNN's audience, at any given moment, is only about 1 million (compared to 5 to 10 million for the ABC, CBS or NBC evening news), it is a tremendously influential audience - journalists, policy makers and news junkies. Try to bring your action to the attention of either the local CNN bureau chief, or to the Environment Unit at world headquarters in Atlanta. CNN is more likely to send a crew to your action than the networks, but remember, they also have the capability of borrowing local footage.

Checklist for Effective Direct Action Media

One month to one week before the action

1. Decide what person or persons will be in charge of media strategy. The benefits of consensus aside, it is nearly impossible to write a press release, focus on a key sound bite, contact key reporters, or accomplish any other media tasks by committee. So empower a media team to make these decisions, and let them do their jobs without second-guessing and micro-managing.

The most logical makeup of the media team is a media coordinator, an action coordinator and the lead campaigner. During the action itself, each of these people will likely be stationed at a point where they can serve as media spokespersons. If the media coordinator is to be stationed at the action site, you need one more member of the team: Someone to stay in an office and work the fax machine (unless you have on-site fax capability).

2. Settle on one simple message. Accept it: You're not going to be able to communicate all the points, sub-points and shades of gray about the issue you'd like to. An action is like a freeway billboard, designed to hammer home one - and



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almost always only one - message. If you can't focus on one issue that's the main reason you're doing the action, you shouldn't be doing the action at all.

3. Choose a strong image that clearly communicates the message. Remember the freeway billboard: With one glance it is (or should be) unmistakable what product or idea is being sold. Ideally, your action should communicate the message without any words of explanation - and always in as few as possible.

If you find yourself saying, "They'll understand it when they read the banner," your image isn't clear enough. But the banner, which will probably contain language very similar to the sound bite, must also be capable of communicating the message on its own. You may not pull off the image; or you may not get the banner up; each, therefore, has to be able to stand alone.

4. Craft sound bites that communicate the message and enhance the image. Assemble the media team. Take out a legal pad. Lock the door. Throw out short, simple, declarative sentences that express your message. (Remember: The average soundbite on U.S. TV is less than 10 seconds.) Write them down. Stay in the room until you have five that might work. From five, choose three. From three, choose one. Shape and refine it until it's as close to perfect as hard work and creativity can make it.
5. Choose a date and hour for the action that will maximize your chances for coverage.

Sometimes you have to do an action when it is possible to do it, or when it's safe to do it. But if circumstances permit you to choose the date and time, make your choices with the media's convenience in mind. Again, there's no formula, but there are some general rules of thumb:

Morning is better than afternoon. Almost no event short of a major catastrophe gets covered on the evening news, or in the next morning's paper, if it occurs after 3 p.m.

Monday through Thursday are the best days, and Monday's best of all, because the later you go in the week, the greater the chance that some other big story will come along and blow you off the news map. Avoid Friday (lowest TV viewership Friday night; lowest newspaper readership Saturday morning; lots of competing news.). Saturday and Sunday are also not the best, because news outlets operate with skeleton crews on weekends.

Combining the above guidelines, we arrive at the theoretical best time for a hypothetical action: 10:30 a.m. on Monday, after news crews have reported to work for the day, but before they've got other stories going.



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But that's assuming your action occurs in a news vacuum, which it won't. Try to time the action so that it either anticipates or responds to an event the media will recognize as a story - "the news peg." If the President plans to sign the bill you're protesting on Thursday, do your action on Wednesday.

One week to a few days before the action

1. Write a draft press release. Circulate the draft release to the media team. Discuss and revise, discuss and revise, until it's perfect or you need to move on.

Remember: The press release is not the message. It also is not the action. The action is the message. The press release is an advertisement to get the media to cover your action. The first two paragraphs are far more important than the rest of the release; the headline is even more important than that.

2. Make a list, with phone and fax numbers, of every news outlet you can think of that might be interested in the story.

If you have time before the action, consult a media directory. The standard national references are the Bacon's News Media Guides, with geographically indexed volumes for print and broadcast. (Bacon's, 332 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60604.) They're expensive, but available in good libraries. Or try to find a directory for your state or region, which may be published by a press club or the like. In a pinch, get out your Yellow Pages.

Check the phone number and fax number listed in the directory to make sure they're correct. Prioritize this list in order of most important outlets, but remember: The Associated Press is (almost) always first.

3. Begin practicing sound bites and mock interviews with the media team.

If someone's never been interviewed on camera and you have one available, videotape each other, play it back and look carefully for anything - words, gestures, expressions, mannerisms, posture - that doesn't enhance effective communication. Practice until you eliminate those things.

4. Decide what supplementary materials - fact sheets, background papers, maps, etc. - are needed for the press kit.

Assemble the materials and folders to put them in. Get them all ready to go, except for the press release, which you'll add after any last-minute changes.



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A few days to one day before the action

Gut check: Decide if it's safe to tip off key reporters in advance.

If there are one or two reporters whose coverage is key, and you decide they can be trusted, approach them now - strictly off the record - and let them know what's going to happen. You may find out they'll be out of town, but they can tell you who will be covering in their place. They may tell you they live two hours away, so they need extra notice. They may want to cover the action from a strategic vantage point. Make adjustments to accommodate them if you can, but never at the expense of a safe, effective, authentic action.

The day before the action

1. Finalize the press release.

If at all possible, keep it to one page. Spell-check it. Proofread it. Get someone else to proofread it again. Print it, copy it and add it to the press kits. (An example of a press release for a breaking-news action follows this checklist.)

2. Alert all media you can trust, and who might possibly want to be on the scene, that the action is going down.

Obviously, there are times when you can't tell anyone. The local newspaper may be in the pocket of the industry you're hitting. The TV anchor in a small market may not know enough not to "accidentally" break a pledge of confidentiality. But in general, if you approach the news media straightforwardly and make sure that you're off the record, they will honor your request to keep the information confidential.

Sometimes you just have to take a deep breath and take a chance, because if news outlets know what's coming you're almost certain to get better coverage. **But do not, under any circumstance, fax them the press release, or anything else except a map** - nothing on paper until the action is safely under way. Faxes can be lost or intercepted.

Ideally, you should speak directly with the reporter who's going to cover the story. If that's not possible, you should ask to speak to the city editor of a newspaper, and the assignment editor of a TV or radio station. Be prepared to tell them in 30 to 60 seconds what you're doing, why you're doing it and why it will make a good story. Make sure they get the exact time and place of the action, and phone numbers where you or someone else on the media team can be reached from that moment until the action.



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The best time to do this round of calls is the late morning or early afternoon before the action. Before 11 a.m., most editors are in meetings; after 4 p.m. they are on deadline and they will not want to talk to you. If you can't call before 4 wait until 7 p.m. and call the night editor.

If you know you'll have reporters on the scene when the action starts - or even think you might have some - do whatever you can to keep news cameras away from the actual site until the action is underway. Have them meet you at a nearby staging area and take them in once your activists are in place. Or tell them to be there half an hour after you expect things to be in place, if you can control the timing that closely.

The night before the action

1. At a meeting of everyone involved - action people, ground protesters, support people - go over the press release, emphasizing the main message and the lead sound bite.

Spend some time with everyone who might possibly be in an arrest or interview situation, letting them practice the sound bite or variations on it. If there are too many of you, partner off and practice in pairs.

The morning of the action

1. Get on the phone by 7:30 a.m. (assuming it's a morning action, which is almost always best for coverage).

Call the TV and radio stations again, to make sure someone on the news desk got the message from the day before and knows what's happening. Again make sure they have the exact time, place and the correct phone numbers for contacts. Most newspapers won't have someone on the desk until 9 a.m.; call them if time permits.

2. Double check to make sure that the person stationed at the fax machine has copies of the release and the prioritized list of news outlets.

As soon as the action begins

You "have an action" at the moment protesters are in place and/or the image and banner are deployed. If you are some distance from the action site, work out a radio signal with the action coordinator, who should notify you the instant this occurs. Then:



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1. Contact the person at the fax machine and tell them to start pumping out the faxes.

It is ideal, if you have the capability, to use multiple fax machines or to pre-store the list of numbers in your fax machine so you can start the process with one command. Do your best, but anything that gets out the maximum number of faxes in the shortest amount of time will help.

2. Begin calling, in order of priority, the news outlets on your fax list. Identify yourself by name and organization, and clearly and succinctly, inform that you have a peaceful protest underway, its location and the purpose. Be calm and businesslike, not urgent or lecturing.

For example: "This is Zazu Pitts with Rainforest Action Network. This morning we are conducting a peaceful, nonviolent protest against Unocal's destruction of the Amazon. Five minutes ago, two climbers scaled to the top of Unocal's headquarters in downtown Los Angeles, and they're going to stay there until the company agrees to meet with us."

At that point, they'll usually say: "Send us a press release." Tell them one is on its way, then say something like: "I just wanted to tell you the protest is going on right now at 123 Main Street, let you know how to reach us, and see if I can answer any questions for you." They'll either say no thanks, or start asking questions. For an action in a major U.S. metropolitan area, these will almost surely be the first few calls you make:

The Associated Press
United Press International and/or Reuters
The 3 or 4 leading TV news stations
The 2 or 3 leading radio news stations
The local newspaper

If you're in a smaller town - one without an AP bureau or TV station - your first calls may be the local newspaper and radio station. But get in touch with the closest AP office as soon as possible.

During the action

- Do not keep calling back with updates, unless they are truly big and unexpected developments. If the outlets are interested, they will be following the action through the authorities.
- **With cellular telephones, it is now common for action protesters to speak live to the news media from where they are hanging or locked down.** News radio



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stations in particular love this, so if you didn't reach them at the beginning of the action, keep trying and make sure they know they can go live to the site.

- It's best to let the people who are actually engaged in direct action deliver the message - it adds undeniable authenticity to the coverage. As media coordinator you should of course also be prepared to deliver crisp, on-message soundbites. But your main responsibility is to help journalists do their jobs.
- Reporters will ask all kinds of questions unrelated to the action's message - **How do they go to the bathroom up there?** You should be ready to provide a courteous answer that nonetheless quickly turns back to the topic at hand. ("They wear diapers. It's inconvenient, but that's nothing compared to the danger this toxic waste poses to this community.")

After the action

When the protesters are arrested, or leave peacefully, or whatever marks the end of the action, call the main outlets mentioned above (at least, those that showed any interest at all) and tell them that the protest ended, what time it ended, and the outcome. Again, make sure they know where you can be reached the rest of the day - and often the following day. If there were arrests and people are released later that day, call again with that update.



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