

# The Change Toolkit

## Chapter 11. Working with media

Media is often an integral part of any campaign to achieve change, and can complement or enhance law reform work to benefit the people who seek help from community legal centres. Yet, for many centres the media is unexplored territory, fraught with risks and pitfalls. It need not be so, and this chapter suggests how you can take incremental steps to build your media capacity and effectiveness. This chapter was prepared by Darren Lewin-Hill, Communications Manager, Federation of Community Legal Centres.

### When to engage with the media

You should consider a number of factors when deciding if you should engage with the media. In a nutshell, if your organisation is in a position to contribute in a timely and authoritative manner that progresses the public debate, increases the prospect of achieving the changes you seek, reflects your organisational objectives, and benefits the people you serve, there is a strong case to make media comment.

To balance common concerns about making a mistake in your media engagement, consider the risks of a failure to engage, including the absence of a voice representing the people you serve, or arguing for necessary law reform.

### Who engages and what can be said?

Organisations benefit when they broaden the base of media spokespeople they use who can speak authoritatively on behalf of the organisation. Your strategic plan and policy positions are the basic guide for what can be said, and knowledge of these and the ability to communicate them articulately and accurately are good guides to who can say it. Developing a

media protocol for this is a good idea – whether implicit or explicit, all organisations that use the media effectively will have one.

### Timing

Time is of the essence when responding to media, and responsiveness and reliability – as well as the quality of what you have to say – will be key factors in building strong and trusting relationships with journalists. Organisations need to establish effective means of monitoring the media, formulating responses, and approving these in an agile manner if they are to take advantage of perishable and transient media opportunities. Whether you are responding to issues in the media, or seeking to create them, a sense of urgency and aiming to get in early are vital.

A note on approval of media releases. Lawyers, a media release is not a contract! While you should always strive both for simplicity and accuracy, there are diminishing returns of minute consideration of all possible interpretations of your language. Regardless of any such activity, alternative interpretations can always be found. A good media release strikes an appropriate balance between the will

to correctness and the appreciation of urgency and simplicity.

## Finding journalists and targeting your engagement

There are many ways of doing this depending on the resources of your organisation. It is possible with minimal resources to engage in good media monitoring without paying for a commercial service. Training all staff to be media aware, creating Google alerts, and subscribing to RSS news feeds that deliver news headlines to your desktop or mobile device are all useful approaches.

Particularly useful is following Twitter, including journalists on Twitter who write about your particular issues. By doing so, you can often be alerted to issues as they are in the process of becoming media stories, so that it is sometimes possible to engage and become part of the story. Following Twitter accounts that aggregate useful news is also a very good idea – for community legal centres @CommunitylawVic is a very useful and frequently updated account to follow.

If your organisation is not on Twitter, it needs to be as soon as possible. Tweeting your news and views – maximising their visibility by using popular and relevant hashtags such as “#springst” – maximises the chances that media will engage you without a media release even being issued.

## When journalists contact you

Be clear if your organisation has a position on the issue, is likely to have someone available who will be able to comment, and in broad terms what they are likely to say. Think about how your position is likely to be portrayed in the context of the broader story and what effect media coverage of the issue will have on the stakeholders you want to influence. Establish if the interview is live or pre-recorded, for print, radio or television, and when it will run. It is also useful to ask if the journalist is

envisaging a particular angle, and who else they have spoken to. Effective media organisations have or develop the capacity to quickly consider these factors and decide if they will comment.

Should you proceed, a firm and dependable arrangement should be made to conduct the interview. Reliability and thoroughness in this regard will be rewarded by trust and responsiveness from the journalist in potential future engagements.

## What to do with the interview

Knowing when the interview will run, it can be promoted to your stakeholders via email and social media before it takes place. Media reported as online text, audio, or video is especially valuable, as you can also promote it after the interview, thereby significantly broadening the base reached by your media comments.

## Being issues-based

If your organisation cannot comment, but knows of someone who can, refer them to the journalist. You may benefit from similar such referrals, but being issues-based rather than organisation-centric demonstrates that your organisation is not a single voice on a particular issue and that you are a valuable first option for journalists seeking comment.

## Remember that you are the media

Not all attempts to engage the mainstream media will be successful, but organisations should remember that in an important sense, they, too, are the media given the digital communication platforms now available. If your letter to the editor, media release or opinion piece did not get picked up, pick it up yourself, publish it on your blog, post it on Twitter, and encourage your partners and stakeholders to help promote it. That content will remain on the web, will be indexed by search engines, and may well direct searching

journalists to you for future coverage.

## Relationships with journalists

Remember that your media engagement should be of mutual benefit to the journalist and your organisation. It is essential to build honest relationships that include the opportunity for respectful disagreement over

the coverage in particular stories. There is no point being needlessly grateful for media coverage. Your media engagement is there to get the issue in the public eye in an effective way. Journalists with whom you are able to develop such a relationship are the ones whom you can trust and should be your first choice in targeting your comment.

## Acknowledgments

**This chapter has been downloaded from <http://www.thechangetoolkit.org.au>. We recommend checking back to see if the content has been updated.**

The Change Toolkit was prepared by the Federation of Community Legal Centres. The Federation is the peak body for community legal centres across Victoria.

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