



Media Toolkit: Recommendations for Earned Media

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Media outreach is an important means for reaching your audience and advocating for reproductive health, rights and justice. This toolkit is meant as guidance for how to engage with the media to advance your goals, covering topics from setting goals to best practices in media engagement, and highlights resources along the way.

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1. Setting Your Goals

This section will discuss how to set goals for earned media. Earned media is publicity and attention “earned” through unpaid means, such as published opinion-editorials, quotes in news stories, and press conferences. (“Paid media” is publicity that is paid for, such as advertising and paid promotions; “owned media” is media you “own,” such as your organization’s website and social media channels)

Although it’s tempting to try to reach *everyone* with your important message, earned media is most effective when you identify your goals and choose your tactics to meet those goals.

First, what do you want to achieve through earned media? Some options include:

- Attention to an event or the launch of a new initiative
- Advocacy around legislation
- Decrying or praising someone’s actions/comments
- Building your organization’s visibility as experts on a certain topic, with unique commentary to offer

Next, ask: to do this, whose attention is most appropriate? Answers could include:

- Established activists and supporters
- Legislators
- Any members of the press
- Members of the press who may be supportive or especially trustworthy to cover your issue
- Media influencers
- Specific community leaders
- General public or voters

Finally: what individual or organizational capacity do you have to create, distribute, and engage with earned media?

Before you head full force into engaging in earned media, think carefully about what your internal capacity is to produce content as well as your readiness to effectively handle any media attention. Many times, the op-ed you submit or the press release you distribute will go unpublished or unnoticed; there will be other times you will likely be surprised by the volume of media attention you receive! Always think through the potential outcomes of your outreach and be realistic about what you’re prepared to handle (which includes rejections).

2. Determining Your Tactics

Next, identify the tactics that are specifically tailored to meeting your goals -- both increasing your chance of success and cutting down on unnecessary efforts.

Letters to the Editor

Purpose: A Letter to the Editor (LTE) is a quick and pithy response to a specific article or op-ed, all within the same publication. The point of the LTE is clear and easily identifiable. LTEs are great for expanding on a topic, correcting misinformation, or offering a counterpoint.

Format: Timeliness and brevity are key: for daily publications, an LTE should be submitted within 1 - 3 days of the publication of the original piece the LTE is addressing (though it may take some time for it to be published). For weekly publications, submit within one week. Make sure the publication accepts LTEs and that you abide by their word limit, which is typically around 150 words.

The LTE should first name the piece it is addressing e.g., "Re: 'Abortion Is About More Than Money' by Lori Szala (Op-Ed, May 9)." Address one key point – trying to tackle multiple issues can get complicated (and wordy!). End with your full name and contact information. Rarely will publications accept LTEs that are only partially signed or anonymous.

Other considerations: Many outlets reserve the right to edit submissions for length or clarity; they may write a headline for your LTE or group it with LTEs on the same topic under a headline of their choosing (be prepared that it may be something you wouldn't have chosen). Some outlets need to verify your submission with you before publication, so be sure to include your best contact information (phone and email) and keep an eye out for their outreach.

Resources:

Examples of LTES: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/opinion/a-womans-decision-to-give-birth-or-abort.html>

Opinion-Editorial (Op-Ed)

Purpose: An op-ed is a persuasive opinion piece about a specific topic and a great way to bring visibility to an author and/or organization. Op-eds should offer unique insight on an issue that is relevant and timely. Op-eds have one strong main point, and like LTEs, do not address multiple issues (though they may include multiple components of a single important issue).

Format: Each publication will have its own formatting requirements, including a word limit (typically around 750 words). Speak with your unique voice and experiences; use illustrative arguments that support your point. Avoid technical jargon and defensive language.

- Start by catching the attention of your readers (and the editors choosing which Op-Eds to publish!) with a “hook”, which can be serious, humorous, or posed as a question – as long as it’s concise;
- Move on to your thesis and support it with your top two to three arguments;
- Acknowledge important criticism to your point (many authors use “to be sure” to begin this paragraph);
- Reinforce your thesis, perhaps by touching back on your hook.

There are many ways to structure an op-ed! We recommend looking at [The Op-Ed Project](#) for more detailed information.

Other considerations: Op-eds can be powerful, labor-intensive, and challenging to get placed as space is usually competitive. Consider who the best author is for representing your organization on the topic at hand, and what the capacity is for those who will be writing and editing the op-ed.

Timing of submission is critical – submit when the issue you’re writing about is particularly relevant and you have something unique to say. The timing of your submission may be part of a larger, timely action, like urging lawmakers to vote a certain way. An op-ed can also be linked to a major news event that just happened or will be happening soon.

Joint op-eds with co-authors can demonstrate how a specific issue or problem has broad importance – and they can also mean a lengthy editing and internal review process between organizations. Think carefully about time, capacity, and if it will be challenging to agree on joint messaging. Some publications do not accept joint op-eds – be sure to check on that specifically first.

To submit the op-ed, you can often find the address for the general op-ed submission inbox on the outlet’s website, or some will have a form where you can enter op-ed content directly. You can also do some research to find an email address for an individual editor (often the opinion editor). Submitting by sending to an individual editor in addition to submitting a web form/general inbox is a good way to cover all your bases – and start to build a relationship with an opinion editor.

Resources

The Op-Ed Project: <https://www.theopedproject.org/>

University of Michigan Practical Policy Engagement Op-Ed Tool: <http://practicalpolicy.umich.edu/sites/practicalpolicy.umich.edu/files/file-assets/AAJA-op-ed-training.pdf>

Op-ed example: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/where-the-fight-for-abortion-rights-will-take-place-next/2019/01/23/36d7026e-1f40-11e9-8b59-0a28f2191131_story.html

Press Release

Purpose: Press releases are for wide distribution to press outlets and should call attention to important newsworthy of broad attention. Press releases encourage reporters and interested parties to contact your organization quickly for more information, helping raise your organization's profile.

Format: Press releases should be one single-spaced page (two if there is critical information you must convey, such as polling results). A press release should have your organization's logo and contact information; a summarizing headline; a clear opening statement of the important issue/event; and supportive quotes from your organization's leadership. Quotes from other notable stakeholders can also bolster the importance of the content. A press release should close with a boilerplate statement about your organization.

Build your distribution list: You'll need a good list of media contacts to whom to send press releases. You can build this list based on your own experience with journalists you know to be interested in your topic, do research to find the outlets and reporters most likely to cover your topics, search social media for reporters posting about your issues, or subscribe to a service like Cision to access a vast media database complete with contact information.

Other considerations: Press releases will hopefully prompt members of the media to get in touch with your organization – so be sure to have your spokesperson available in the days after distribution and prepared for interviews. Not every press release will yield a swarm of media calls, but be prepared every time! Reporters may also use a quote from your organization's press release in their story, so be thoughtful of the quotes you include.

Resources:

Examples of press releases: <https://www.nirhealth.org/blog/2019/06/14/new-york-city-becomes-first-city-nation-directly-fund-abortion-care/>

<https://www.nirhealth.org/blog/2020/01/05/new-report-shows-states-accelerating-protections-for-abortion-access-in-2019-as-part-of-passing-many-of-the-boldest-and-most-proactive-laws-in-a-generation-to-advance-reproductive-freedom/>

Individualized Pitch

Purpose: An individualized pitch is an offer for a story with a specific outlet or reporter on an issue they have covered or may find interesting; this can be useful for embargoed information (meaning you do not want it released until a certain date), long-term and/or in-depth coverage, or especially sensitive or complex topics (e.g., later abortion care). This can also be used to pitch an exclusive, meaning you only speak to one reporter about covering the story at hand.

Format: Pitching can be done in any medium (verbally, via email, etc.). If the information is highly sensitive or under embargo, making the pitch in writing may provide you and the reporter necessary clarity.

Other considerations: Pitching will likely be much more successful if you explain why the story you're offering is exciting and unique – think of this as you make the pitch. Also, maintaining good, trusting relationships with reporters will be key!

Resources:

Columbia Journalism Review guide to pitching: https://www.cjr.org/about_us/submission-guidelines.php

Op-Ed Project guide to pitching: <https://www.theopedproject.org/pitching>

Muck Rack tips from an editor: <https://muckrack.com/blog/2019/02/25/how-to-pitch-op-eds-tips-from-an-editor>

Media Advisory/In Case You Missed It (ICYMI):

Purpose: To draw media attention to a specific moment (an event or publication) that is about to take place or that has just finished, inviting press attention to the moment/event or to your organization.

Format: Both Media Advisories (also known as “press advisories”) and ICYMIs are very basic: think of the 5 Ws – who, what, where, when, why. A brief statement or two about why the issue is important should sum things up. Your organization’s logo and contact information should be clear and visible.

Other considerations: These are not always necessary, but if you will use them, timeliness is key – it’s usually best to release the media advisory a day or two before the event, and the ICYMI in the day or so after.

Resources:

Media advisory template: <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/media-advisory-template>

Press Conference and Press Calls

Purpose: An event where multiple speakers discuss something newsworthy (e.g., the introduction of a bill), positive or negative, which draws press coverage. It may be in conjunction with a rally; some press conferences include the opportunity for press to ask

questions. Press conferences are often held in coalition – multiple organizations, elected officials, and/or local leaders may be involved. This can help foster broad attention and more engaged coverage.

Format: Typically, participating organizations work in coalition to outline a list of speakers and their speaking order. Having one point person to organize the speakers is strongly recommended. Speakers should have unique things to say, and be in alignment with overall messaging. Speakers should keep their comments brief.

Virtual press conferences have become more common, especially during the pandemic, and can be accomplished through Zoom. A virtual press conference could be preferable if there are visuals you'd like to show or if you'd like to record the event. A **press call** is a good way to gather reporters to make an announcement and put specific spokespeople in front of the media. For both, you can get the media's attention through a press release or press advisory as you would a press conference and require that they RSVP to get the call-in info. They are conducted over reliable call-in and conference call services; the basic purpose and format is the same as a press conference.

Other considerations: Ensure the speakers are qualified, prepared, and comfortable. There are also considerable logistics for press conferences, including reserving a location that is appropriate for your subject matter; obtaining a podium or lectern; ensuring proper access for media; technical needs for microphones, speakers, and visual aids; and contingency plans should other groups have press conferences before, after, or nearby (which can happen on the steps of government buildings or in public parks). Also, when multiple speakers are involved, there is a greater chance of schedule changes and last-minute adjustments.

Resources:

Virtual press conference and press call how-to: <https://medium.com/rallybrain/how-to-stage-a-successful-virtual-press-conference-c4c05ca4ee68>

Interviews with Media:

Purpose: To disseminate important information through effective messaging; and/or for the profile elevation of your organization/spokesperson.

Format: Media interviews can happen in person, via Zoom, over the phone, or via email. Most broadcast interviews are, of course, in person!

Other considerations: Ensure that your spokesperson is comfortable and rehearsed – it can be intimidating to remember talking points while answer questions while potentially looking into a camera. A basic media training is strongly suggested for anyone doing broadcast interviews (contact NIRH for more information).

Broadcast interviews often require your spokesperson to visit a local recording studio or similar environment; on rare occasions, reporters will come to you. Broadcast interviews may be conducted over the phone for auditory outlets (such as NPR or a podcast).

Sitting down with a reporter to talk for a **print interview** can help build rapport, but may be difficult to schedule. However, on-the-fly in-person interviews often happen at rallies, press conferences, and other major events.

Phone interviews are very common; ensure a good sound environment and a solid phone connection. Phone interviews can also allow a spokesperson to have talking points in front of them, which can be hugely helpful. It may also be advantageous to have a Communications team member join the spokesperson on the phone interview to provide support in a non-disruptive way (e.g., signaling to the spokesperson that they've gone off track, or pointing to the talking point they should pivot to).

Email interviews are great for minimizing the chance of being misquoted as well as taking the time to craft answers. However, most reporters work with quick turnaround times, and may not be able to wait for your email response.

Many reporters ask at the start of an interview if they can record your conversation. This is most often done so they can be sure they quote you accurately – so thank them for asking and let them record. If you aren't comfortable being recorded or have concerns about how the recording would be used, assess if this is an interview you should be doing.

“On background” interviews may be requested by members of the media when they truly want to gain a better understanding of the ins and outs of a current issue or event – they are seeking background information. These interviews are typically more relaxed, where spokespeople are not aiming to give “sound bites” but instead, offer the reporter issue education. However, it is important to not let these interviews become *too* relaxed, as reporters may quote your spokesperson anyway. Interviews “on background” can be great in building relationships with reporters, as they are often grateful for a better understanding of the issue at hand. Your organization's spokesperson and the reporter should be in clear agreement if an interview is to be conducted “on background.”

“Off the record” conversations or interviews should be utilized in the rarest of circumstances, if ever – many communications experts will suggest that nothing is ever truly “off the record.” If your organization's spokesperson has a significant amount of trust in a reporter, this may be an option, but should be used sparingly.

3. Preparing for Media Outreach

Spokespeople

Firmly establish who your **spokespeople** are to represent your organization in the media. Anyone speaking for the organization should be authorized by organizational leadership (usually by President or Executive Director) and should be comfortable with press, elected officials, stakeholders, and the general public. Spokespeople should also have an ongoing relationship with the organization (staff, Board member, long-term supporter or volunteer). Your organization may have multiple spokespeople, and should not be limited to the executive leadership. Think through who would be a good fit and why based on their experience, expertise, and comfort – there is immense value in having a diverse group of spokespeople who reflect the different communities your organization works on behalf of.

Develop talking points that include easy-to-understand, broad information about your organization, what you're working on, and the topic at hand, as well as specific "sound bites" that encapsulate value statements of your organization. Ensure you anticipate tough questions and have those answers ready to go – even members of the media who may be personally supportive of your issue can ask tough questions.

If you're encouraging activists or supporters to speak in support of your organization or a specific issue, **ensure that their involvement or stake in the issue is clear**. Intentionally decide before an event involving activists (such as a march or rally), if you feel comfortable with them talking to press as they are essentially representing your organization.

If so, brief them with talking points before a major event starts, and remind them that if they are approached by press and do not feel comfortable, they should direct members of the press to someone in your organization who can coordinate with a spokesperson.

It is also appropriate to tell activists that they can direct the press to designated individuals. Even the most well-intended activists can take your message off track, especially if they're pressed by media – don't hesitate to lay down ground rules. Of course, if your event is large and keeping activists from press isn't feasible, do your best to distribute talking points to them, and verbally review what not to say to press

Choosing Which Outlets to Engage

Select the outlets you engage with judiciously – you don't need to say "yes" to every blogger out there, nor should you feel obligated to engage with outlets who are in clear opposition to your values and would likely use your quotes to drum up opposition support. On the flip side, don't hold out for top-tier or highly specialized publications only – you may be waiting a long time for press attention! You also may miss an opportunity to reach an audience you might not reach otherwise.

Relationships with Outlets

Most mainstream media outlets are pre-disposed to the “balanced story” – beware of what this may mean (e.g. equating an experienced medical provider and clinic protestor).

Build your network of friendly reporters:

- Be willing to speak off the record and/or on background as needed (but always maintain caution and professionalism when speaking to the media).
- Follow up with resources (reports, statistics, etc.) in a timely way.
- Invite them to better understand the work (e.g., clinic tours, embedded with staff for an afternoon).
- When appropriate and useful, offer them stories on embargo – meaning you give them background information and an interview, but agree that they will not publish before a certain date (which may be important if the story is tied to legislation or the announcement of a new initiative). This can help them get a great start on a story, and allows you some control of not “spoiling” your big announcement.
- Frequently confirm that they have your contact information and are welcome to reach out to you for follow-ups or any additional questions they think of.

4. Best Practices in Messaging

Developing an Effective Message

As you figure out how you are going to engage with the media, ensure you develop a clear and thoughtful message. Using values-based messages helps reduce shame and stigma around abortion and motivate people to act. Effective values-based messages have three parts: vision, problem, and solution.

- The **vision** statement taps into the values and deeply held beliefs that resonate with your target audience about the issue at hand.
- The **problem** raises awareness of the problem at hand and illustrates the impact the problem has on people's lives.
- The **solution** should clearly state what you're proposing and action people can take.

Examples of good messages appear below, but you should adjust them to make them true to your organizational voice and specific to the issue you are addressing. The key thing to keep in mind is to lead with your values, explain the threat or problem, and present the solution.

Messaging in the Moment

Relate the work of your organization to the moment/event: understand how they are connected (and know when they are not - no need to swing at every opportunity!).

Develop talking points which include message pivots: acknowledge the issue at hand, shift to the work of your organization, and explain your (important) perspective.

Anticipate questions: what questions are typically asked on a certain topic? What would someone who is not familiar with the movement want to know? What do we *want* them to know?

Dealing with Disinformation Campaigns

The anti-abortion movement may choose to seize on any legislation, policy, or event that supports abortion rights and access with lies and a disinformation campaign.

There are several best practices to handle this and right the ship:

- Create and disseminate internal talking points as needed: don't assume everyone in your organization, your Board, etc., are on the same page or feel comfortable talking about the issue with family and friends (which they inevitably will, especially on social media!).
- Reporter education: lean into relationships with reporters to offer correct information. Organize a press call.

- Contact and coordinate with allies and legislators: don't assume everyone is on the same page; legislators may be getting heat from constituents. Reach out with talking points and support.
- Create a public-facing "Setting the Record Straight"-type document, outlining key information.
- Don't repeat opposition claims – research shows this only reinforces the opposition message. "Myths and Facts" sheets often result in spreading the myths even further. Opt for a document that only presents the facts and sets the record straight instead.
- Contextualize information, acknowledge that bad information is in circulation, and frame your issue positively.
- Promote your document through your channels: social, email, etc.; let the document live somewhere visible and accessible, such as your website.

Key Messages

Lead with the core values that we hold about abortion access to create a deeper connection with your audience:

- "We all want to be able to live a safe and healthy life and be free to define our own path."
- "People should have the rights, freedoms, and opportunities to control their lives at the most basic level, including their bodies and their life's path – and that includes the right and ability to have an abortion."
- "The decision about whether and when to become a parent is one of the most important life decisions we make. When people can make decisions that are best for their lives, families thrive and we build communities where each of us can participate with dignity and equality."

Articulate the problem the country is currently facing and the impact and intent of the harmful state and federal policies:

- "Since 2011, anti-abortion politicians have quietly passed more than 480 medically unnecessary and politically-motivated state restrictions, creating a web of barriers that push safe and affordable abortion care out of reach, especially for people struggling to make ends meet, young people, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color.
- "Anti-abortion politicians – at the federal, state, and local levels -- have been misrepresenting efforts to protect access to abortion care, using inflammatory, deceptive, and insulting language just to score political points."

- “With the balance of the Supreme Court now turned against abortion rights, we face the threat of abortion care being dismantled even more aggressively and systematically, and the threat of women and their health care providers being arrested and sent to jail.”
- “Politicians are trying to shame, pressure, and punish women who have decided to have an abortion.”

Give folks a vision of what abortion access could look like with positive messages that center the individual and what their experience should be:

- “With increased threats to abortion care, we need to protect women’s health and ensure that abortion care remains safe and legal.”
- “States have the opportunity to make sure people can access abortion care with dignity and respect by passing laws that secure a future that safeguards abortion care, upholds basic rights and justice, and respects decision-making.”
- “States need to remove barriers that currently tie the hands of medical professionals who should be free to provide the best care for their patients, and treat abortion as a matter of health care, not a criminal act.”
- “We need to pass laws that respect, support, and empower women and ensure that everyone has access to respectful, quality, and affordable reproductive health care, including abortion.”

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>Say this ...</i>	<i>Because...</i>
Pro-choice/Pro-life	In support of abortion rights and access; anti-abortion, abortion opponents	People often identify as both pro-choice and pro-life, so the labels are not useful in messaging. “Choice” is also an issue of privilege; “pro-life” accepts the opposition’s framing.
Women’s health care, choice, or reproductive choice	Abortion, Access to abortion, abortion care	Euphemisms are confusing and stigmatizing.
Person’s choice	Personal decision, important life decision	A “decision” is seen as more serious than “choice,” which can be perceived as less thoughtful and impulsive.

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>Say this ...</i>	<i>Because...</i>
Abortion should be safe, legal, and rare	Legal abortion must be available and affordable	Saying “rare” increases stigma and can create support for restrictions.
No one wants to have an abortion; this is a devastating decision	We don’t know every woman’s circumstances; this is a personal decision	Convey seriousness without stigma or assuming how the woman feels.
The government shouldn’t interfere/should stay out of our personal decisions	“Some politicians” or special interest groups want to impose their values on others	The government has a role in ensuring access to a full range of healthcare, including abortion care.
Deserves	Ability; should be able to; need	“Deserves” is a term that can result in pushback from some audiences.
Justifying by listing details or reasons why a woman is having an abortion (e.g. rape, incest, etc.)	Mention decision-making process: “thinking through her decision,” “talking it over with loved ones”; remind audiences that “she has made her decision”	Listing reasons or exceptions increases judgment and can lead to support for restrictions. Audiences, including those opposed to abortion, respond much more positively when the reasons why someone is choosing an abortion aren’t litigated.
Stereotypes of who has abortions (e.g. poor women, those dependent on government funding)	Families/women working to make ends meet	Reduce stereotyping and judgment.
Fair, unfair, fairness	We should not treat people differently just because they are poor; live in a certain zip code; etc.	“Fair, unfair, fairness” are terms that can result in pushback from audiences.

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>Say this ...</i>	<i>Because...</i>
We can't go back to pre-Roe days with women dying from back alley abortions	We all want to be able to live a safe and healthy life and be free to define our own path	So much has changed since 1973, including internet access to medication abortion. Audiences respond well to positive values reflecting access to abortion that is safe, affordable, and available
Abortion is not infanticide.	Every pregnancy and every women's circumstances are different. Instead of respecting a women's decision, anti-abortion opponents resort to inflammatory, shaming rhetoric.	We do not want to repeat opposition claims – research shows that abortion rights supporters will remember inflammatory words more than the overall message! Acknowledge the misinformation and pivot to a positive, values-based message.
Mother	<p>Woman,* person*</p> <p>* Women are not the only people who get abortions – transgender men, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary can become pregnant and need access to abortion care. Using “people” instead of “woman” may be confusing for some audiences who are not familiar with language pertaining to gender identity. NIRH strongly encourages inclusivity in language while recognizing the need for clear communication with varied audiences.</p>	This makes an assumption about how the woman is experiencing her pregnancy; her agency is also not reliant on being pregnant.

Message grid courtesy of The COMS Project