



A MEDIA TOOLKIT FOR YOUTH

by Media Awareness Network

http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/special_initiatives/toolkit/

The News Industry

What sorts of stories make it into the news, and why?

Who decides which stories get reported, and from what angle?
What challenges do reporters face, and how do these challenges affect the news we read and watch?

By knowing how the news industry works, we can find out how to reach the people who shape the news in order to change these stereotypes.

This section looks at the basic functions and motives of the news industry, and some of the challenges journalists face in doing their jobs.

"Positive doesn't sell. Who buys a newspaper to read about youth volunteering, or even having fun? Not many people. They would rather spend their money on something more important—like war, or even teenage vandalism."

"Speak Out" MNet's discussion group for youth

What is News?

News has two priorities: it must be current, and it must mean something to people. A story about the environment and a story about the Oscars can both be newsworthy, for different reasons.

On the surface at least, the objective of news is to inform the audience. It's the job of all the news media to tell people what's going on in their community - locally, nationally or globally. In this sense, the news media provide a valuable public service.



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But the media are also businesses - and like all businesses they have to make money to keep going. Audiences today can get news and information from many different sources. This increased competition is putting pressure on media outlets to attract advertising dollars to keep them running. This is especially true for privately owned media, but it's also a concern for publicly owned media (such as CBC) that need to attract audiences and ad revenues to survive.

Media outlets have to cater to their audiences, and they compete with one another to provide what they think their "customers" want. This can certainly mean honest and factual news reporting. But it can also mean shorter, more exciting stories; flashy, sexy, or shocking images; crime, death, disaster, tragedy; confrontation, violence, controversy; or anything else that might attract viewers or readers. When taken to extremes (as in the "tabloid" newspapers or television shows), "news" can become just another type of sensational entertainment.

Who Does What?

Large news organizations have many employees who perform many specialized jobs. But when it comes to increasing your visibility in the media, the key contacts you need to know are reporters and editors.

Reporters

Reporters are responsible for coming up with story ideas, researching them and interviewing, for them and writing the stories in an interesting way. They are often assigned a beat, a field or subject on which to report, such as Politics, Entertainment or Health. Some media outlets may even have a Youth beat. If there isn't one, take note of who usually covers youth-related issues, perhaps the reporters on the City, Education or Social Issues beat.

In most newsrooms, reporters are given story ideas by their assigning editors. They're expected to follow up the idea by identifying and contacting sources and doing background research.

Reporters are also open to suggestions for story ideas from readers, viewers or other sources. Journalists always want to beat other news outlets to a good story, so they're particularly interested in new ideas or unexplored angles.



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Editors

Editors are the gatekeepers who have the power to decide which stories are newsworthy and which are not. Editors oversee reporters, and they're responsible for the content of the newspaper or news show. It's their job to keep track of what's being covered, and how.

Most newspapers, magazines, and radio and television stations have assigning editors who assign story ideas to reporters. They often determine what angle reporters should take, and even who they should interview.

Editors also evaluate what their reporters write, and have the power to approve it before it gets published or goes on the air.

What Challenges do Journalists Face?

Tight deadlines are a fact of life in journalism, since newspapers and news shows are generally distributed daily. A TV or radio reporter may be handed a story idea (or two) at 9 a.m., which must be ready to be aired for that day's newscast at 6 p.m.

The reporters must interview their sources and write their stories by mid-afternoon, to allow time to review and edit their taped interviews and footage into a story. Newspaper deadlines are a little longer, since many newspapers are now printed overnight. Reporters may have until 11 p.m. to hand in their stories.

For this reason, most successful planned news events (such as press conferences) are held in the morning, usually between 9 and 11 a.m. This gives the reporter enough time to attend the event, interview other sources afterwards, and go back to the newsroom to write and prepare the story.

But these daily deadlines make it difficult for reporters to interview young people. Even if a journalist wants a youth perspective in a story, most young people are inaccessible during the day - busy at school.

Of course, not all stories are written and produced in the course of a single working day. "Features" - in-depth pieces that cover an issue or event from different angles - can take days and even weeks to research, write, record, edit and produce.

Features also offer journalists the opportunity to spend more time exploring issues, and to present them in a thoughtful way.



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Stereotypes

Going by the stories you've seen in recent years, what image of teenagers is portrayed by the news media in your community? Do the headlines give us a balanced perspective on the lives of today's youth?

This section examines the definition of a stereotype, and looks at how and why negative stereotypes of youth find their way into the news. It also reflects on the effect these negative images have on youth, and on society's attitudes toward teenagers.

Teen hacker pleads guilty
CBC News, January 2001

Canada Teen Injures 5 At School
Associated Press, June 2000

Teen Binge Drinking Almost Doubles
National Post, April 2000

What is a Stereotype?

Stereotypes are as old as human culture itself. They reflect ideas that groups of people hold about others who are different from them.

A stereotype can be embedded in single word or phrase (such as, "jock" or "nerd"), an image, or a combination of words and images. The image evoked is easily recognized and understood by others who share the same views.

Stereotypes can be either positive ("people with disabilities are inspiring") or negative ("it is tragic that the young man is disabled"). But most stereotypes tend to make us feel superior in some way to the person or group being stereotyped. Stereotypes ignore the uniqueness of individuals by painting all members of a group with the same brush.

Stereotypes can appear in the media because of the biases of writers, directors, producers, reporters and editors. But stereotypes can also be useful to the media because they provide a quick identity for a person or group that is easily recognized by an audience. When deadlines loom, it's sometimes faster and easier to use a stereotype to characterize a person or situation, than it is to provide a more complex explanation.

Stereotype: A fixed, commonly held notion or image of a person or group, based on an oversimplification of some observed or imagined trait of behaviour or appearance.



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The Role of Stereotypes in the News

Although most journalists try to be objective and factual in reporting events, there is no such thing as a news story without a point of view. Every news story is influenced by the attitudes and backgrounds of the reporters, photographers and editors who select and edit the images and information they offer us.

Bias can be unintentional or deliberate, depending on the motives of news gatherers and the sources of information they rely on.

Most reporters and editors are adults who, naturally, see the world from an adult's point of view.

They may also assume that their audiences are mostly adults who share similar views. Age-related bias may influence how much importance they attach to issues concerning young people, and the angle they take on such issues.

Stereotypes can be a side effect of tight deadlines. Reporters for daily newspapers or news shows often have to research, write and present a story in one working day. They may not have time to present several sides of an issue. They may need a quick, convenient, pre-packaged image, and a stereotypical word or headline can provide that.

Because the news industry is under pressure to attract readers and viewers, it has to produce stories that are compelling, short and easily understandable to a general audience. By using stereotypes, a complex issue involving people with complex motives can be reduced to a simple conflict between "good guys" and "bad guys." This can happen when the media try to make real events appear more dramatic, or when a situation needs to be explained in a 10-second sound bite.

In the search for images and stories that will attract audiences, the media tend to focus on issues of crime, violence, tragedy and disaster. (Check the local TV news to see how much coverage they give to what the police and fire departments did today!) While car crashes and shootings are sure-fire attention grabbers, a steady diet of these images can give us a distorted view of what goes on in the world. The negative slant of the news means that when young people (and members of other minority groups) do appear in the headlines, it is most often in the context of drugs, violence, death, or some other alarming issue.



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Stereotyping and Its Impact

Stereotypes of a group of people can affect the way society views them, and change society's expectations of them. With enough exposure to a stereotype, society may come to view it as a reality rather than a chosen representation.

The media can be a powerful tool in creating or reinforcing stereotypes. An example is the public perception that youth crime is on the rise, or out of control.

This impression has been created largely through media coverage of alarming stories about high school shootings, property crimes, and incidents involving so-called youth gangs.

Statistics tell a different story. According to Statistics Canada, incidences of youth homicide have been on the decrease for years. There were 30 youths accused of homicide in 2001 - the lowest level in over 30 years and 18 fewer than the average of 48 over the past decade.

Between 1987 and 1997, the rate of youth charged with property offences, the most common kind of youth crime, dropped steadily.

Prompted by sensational headlines, politicians and lobby groups have called for tougher measures to deal with young offenders and to combat a perceived increase in youth crime. This despite the fact that young offenders already receive stiffer jail sentences in certain cases than adults who commit similar crimes (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Negative stereotypes not only affect how adults see teenagers, they influence how teenagers see themselves. The feeling that the rest of the world doesn't respect or understand you does little to encourage a positive sense of self-worth.

Other minority groups in society -- such as blacks, native people, women, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians -- have all experienced the effects of negative stereotyping and lack of positive images in the media.

Many of these groups have lobbied successfully to educate the media about issues that concern them, to challenge stereotypes, and to provide more balanced coverage of their communities.



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One youth from Montreal, aged 15, sums up the feelings of many teens: "Today's youths are intelligent but some adults don't seem to think so. We are people too. Youths are discriminated against and that's not right. To get through to young people, you have to listen to them, trust them, and respect them. The way I look and the music I listen to does not make me a "bad" person. I am my own person." (*Canada's Teens: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*)

Accessing the Media

How do you go about getting a story or event covered by the media? How can we educate news reporters and editors about youth issues, and get them to change negative images of youth?

Many groups have been successful in challenging negative media stereotypes. It takes some planning, preparation and persistence. But if you know how to access the media, you can get your voice heard and your message across.

By actively trying to change the way the media portray youth, young people can influence the way society - and policymakers - view the roles of youth in society.

The following sections provide information that will help you to access mainstream, community, youth and online media. Background resources include tips on how to get youth perspectives into the news; and how to create your own communications strategy, organize media events, write news releases, and pitch story ideas to the press.

Accessing Mainstream Media

The mainstream media consist of outlets that cover a larger territory than your own neighborhood. For instance, your city's daily newspaper would be a mainstream media outlet. So would your local television and radio stations. Mainstream media outlets can also be national and even international.

Accessing mainstream media outlets is a process that takes plenty of persistence. The larger a media outlet is, the more difficult it is to get its attention. But with some planning and determination, you can get it to notice you.

"An important issue is how adults treat me just because I'm a teenager. Sure there are bad ones out there but I'm not one of them. It doesn't just hurt but it's disrespectful when security igures follow me around like I'm some kind of loser or criminal."

Canada's Teens,
Today, Yesterday, and
Tomorrow



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Wire Tap

<http://www.wiretapmag.org>

This independent e-zine, based in San Francisco, features "investigative news articles, essays, artwork and activism resources that challenge stereotypes, inspire creativity, foster dialogue, and give young people a voice in the media." The Web site includes message boards and youth media links.

Listen Up!

<http://listenup.org/>

This PBS (Public Broadcasting System) project offers tools and resources to help young people learn how to research, write, produce and distribute their own media.

Youth Radio

<http://www.youthradio.org>

Youth Radio's interactive Web site features radio reports produced by young people.

Reel Grrls Media Project

<http://www.reelgrrls.org>

The Reel Grrls project is for girls ages 14-18 who have a desire to examine the image of girls in the media and learn skills to create their own media. A Seattle-based partnership between 911 Media Arts Center, the YMCA and the local PBS station, Reel Grrls teaches teenage girls how to be critical television watchers and then producers of their own media.

Generation PRX

<http://generation.prx.org>

Generation PRX promotes youth voices by working with stations to broadcast youth radio and provides an online space for peer review and feedback.

Just Think

<http://www.justthink.org>

Just Think delivers educational programs that helps youth to understand and create media messages. Just Think aims to help young media makers express themselves and find their own voice.



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MediaRights

<http://www.mediarights.org>

MediaRights is a community organization dedicated to maximizing the impact of social-issue documentaries and shorts. MediaRights helps youth filmmakers reach audiences, educators and librarians.

YO OUTLOOK

<http://www.youthoutlook.org>

YO! (Youth Outlook) is a literary journal by and about young people. YO! has a national distribution of 25,000 magazines printed monthly (10 times a year through the school season), a local access monthly TV show (YO!TV), partnerships with radio broadcasts and an annual expo.

Street-Level Youth Media

<http://www.street-level.org>

Street-Level Youth Media educates inner city youth in media arts and emerging technologies for use in self-expression, communication, and social change. Based in Chicago, Street-Level Youth Media helps young people find their voice and address community issues.

Being Interviewed

Your efforts have paid off and you've been approached by the media to do an interview. There may be several reasons why a reporter wants to talk to you:

- You're the official spokesperson for an organization or event.
- The reporter has asked you to respond to a specific youth-related story because you've developed a good relationship with him/her.
- In response to a news story, the reporter wants a "reaction clip" (a five- to ten-second bite) that offers an emotional response.
- The reporter wants a fresh perspective and an honest point of view. (That's attractive to reporters who are used to media-savvy spokespeople who always feed them the same lines.)
- The media want to appear young and hip. The mainstream media are predominantly staffed by middle-aged men, but their audiences cover a much broader demographic. By including interviews with young people in their stories, media types hope to attract a broader crowd - including young people.



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The information in the following sections will help you learn how to get your message across effectively in an interview, and how to understand your rights when approached by a reporter. We also look at a fictional case study that shows how being prepared - or *not* being prepared - can make a difference to the outcome of the story.

Before the Interview

Some tips to help you prepare for an interview:

Understand why you are being interviewed

Find out exactly what the topic and angle of the interview will be. How will the interview be used - for a news story, a current affairs feature or an entertainment piece?

Don't be afraid to do the interview

People often turn down the chance to be interviewed because they're nervous, or afraid they'll say the wrong thing. Instead, think of the interview as a golden opportunity for you to convey your message. If perceptions about you, your school, or youth in general have been wrong in the past, this is your chance to set the record straight.

Know your rights

Remember, you do have a choice about being interviewed. If you're uncomfortable with the idea, you *can* say no. You can also discuss options with the reporter: you can ask that only your first name be used, you can ask for anonymity, or you can ask to be interviewed off-camera. If the reporter has called to interview you over the phone and you don't feel prepared to talk right away, ask the reporter when you can call him/her back. But don't back out just because you're intimidated. The only way you'll get to be media-savvy is to practice!

Think about what you want your main message to be

What is your reason for wanting to speak to the reporter? Think about the main message you want to convey, and how to weave it into every answer you give. That way, even if your answers are cut and spliced during the editing process, your message will still come through. (For more on this, see the *Preparing Your Main Message* section.)



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Be prepared, but not over-rehearsed

If possible, get a list ahead of time of the questions you'll be asked. This is common practice for television and radio interviews. It gives you the chance to think of what you want to say before you're asked the questions on-air. Make sure you know your subject inside and out. Write down answers to any questions you think may be asked, but avoid memorizing statements. A successful interview should never appear rehearsed - and reporters dislike prepared statements, because they sound stiff and unnatural. Besides, if you depend on prepared statements you could be thrown off if the reporter asks you an unexpected question.

Preparing Your Main Message

Your main message is the most important information to communicate to your audience. It's the whole reason you developed a communications plan, gave an interview, or wrote a news release in the first place. Here are some tips on how to make your main message effective:

Keep it clear

It's vital that you're clear on exactly what your message is, and why it's urgent to get it across to the public. To identify your core argument, ask yourself: "What do I care most about?" Also ask: "Why should the audience care?"

Keep it simple

Your main message can have several points to it, though it's best to have no more than three. The more points you try to cram in, the harder it will be for your audience to identify them, and the weaker their effect will be. You want each part of your message to be easily identifiable in your news releases, Web sites, etc.

Keep repeating it

Weaving your message into everything you do takes practice. In the world of public relations, this is known as spin. (Those who specialize in it are called "spin doctors.") The key is consistency. Decide on two or three main points, and use them - either word-for-word or paraphrased - in all the answers you give, all the news releases you write, all the emails you send. If you can, use facts and figures: these are indisputable, and give credibility to your spin. (To show how sticking to your main message can make a difference in how a story is reported, see *A Case Study*.)



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During the Interview

The following tips will help guide you through your interview:

Be positive

Try not to appear negative or confrontational. A hostile attitude will make it difficult for viewers to take your point seriously.

Stay calm

While emotional outbursts may make good TV, they will erode your credibility.

Treat the interviewer with respect

Remember that when you speak to a reporter, you're potentially speaking to an audience of hundreds or thousands of people.

If you don't know the answer to a question, be honest

Say that you don't know, but you'll try to get the information. Make sure you keep that promise, though - nothing sours a good relationship with a reporter faster than keeping him/her waiting for necessary information.

Speak clearly and firmly

Offer the reporter just the facts; don't speculate or estimate, even if you're asked to. Don't feel you have to fill "dead air" - that's the interviewer's job. When you've answered a question, stop talking.

Be helpful

Suggest other sources the reporter could interview. Mention anything that you think might be helpful and offer approaches s/he may not have thought of.

Don't worry about repeating your main message

Your goal is to make sure your message gets across. If that's the only answer you offer the interviewer, then they will have no choice but to use it.



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Don't be afraid to assert yourself

If you're uncomfortable answering a question, just say firmly that you don't think you are the appropriate person to comment. Remember that no reporter has the right to bully you into answering a question if you don't want to.

TV Appearances

TV interviews are different from those done for print or radio. In TV interviews your appearance can be just as important as your words. Here are some general tips:

- Ask the reporter ahead of time what s/he plans to ask you. This will give you a chance to think of what you want to say before the cameras start rolling. The location of the interview could reflect on the story, so if you have a choice, suggest a location you're comfortable with.
- Avoid wearing anything that could distract the audience from what you say, such as extremely bright clothing, busy patterns or large jewelry.
- Whether you like it or not, people will judge you on how you look, so try to look professional and tidy. Ask yourself which do you want to stand more: your appearance or your words?
- Always maintain eye contact with the person you're speaking to. This could be one reporter, several reporters, or a studio audience. But avoid looking at the camera - just pretend it's not there.
- Speak in short, concise sentences. If you answer reporters clearly, they're less likely to edit your statements - and maybe cut out important points. Remember, the average interview clip in a news story is only 7-15 seconds!
- Sit still or stand still. Try not to fidget in front of the camera - small movements such as nail biting or foot tapping are magnified on screen. Sit with your hands folded in your lap and both feet planted on the ground. No swivel chairs or rocking chairs!

http://www.mediaawareness.ca/english/special_initiatives/toolkit/being_interviewed/cestudy/index.cfm