

## Media Toolkit

# UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE MEDIA WANT



What is news and who cares about it?

### THE SIMPLE RULE: MEDIA COVER NEWS

The rule can be broken down by defining who the media are and what they want.

## WHO ARE THE MEDIA?

They communicate to the public—specifically newspapers, magazines, newsletters, Web sites, television, and radio.

News is commonplace. It's all around us. Unfortunately, understanding what makes news, and the value of news coverage is anything but commonplace.

## WHAT IS NEWS?

**M. Lyle Spencer, former dean of the Journalism Department at the University of Washington, offered a standard definition of news:**

“News is...any event, idea, or opinion that is timely, that interests or affects a large number of people in a community, and that is capable of being understood by them.”

Some other definitions:

“News is anything you didn't know yesterday.”—Turner Catledge, former executive editor, the *New York Times*

“News is change.”—Reuven Frank, president, *NBC News*, 1971

“When a dog bites a man, that's not news because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that's news.”—John Bogart, 1918

According to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, news is a report of recent events or matter that is newsworthy. Newsworthy is defined as sufficiently interesting to the general public to warrant reporting. News, for social workers, is a story or idea that illustrates the profession's issues and mission.

## WHAT MEDIA SHOULD YOU TARGET?

Traditional media is still the most credible source for consumers to find information that affects their lives. According to a 2006 Lexis Nexis survey (Lexis Nexis is a searchable database of newspaper and magazine articles, as well as legal documents), when consumers are faced with major events that significantly affect their lives, their trust mostly remains with the traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio, versus emerging media sources such as blogs.

- 50% - network television for immediate news
- 42% - radio
- 37% - daily local newspapers
- 33% - cable news or business networks
- 25% - Internet sites of print and broadcast media
- 6% - emerging media like Internet user groups, blogs and chat rooms

(Source: [www.lexisnexis.com/about/releases/0928.asp](http://www.lexisnexis.com/about/releases/0928.asp))

Another survey by the University of Michigan in 2008 found that the most credible news source was traditional media (all print and television sources) with their online counterparts, followed by radio and non-traditional Internet.

(Source: [www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/story.php?id=6440](http://www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/story.php?id=6440))

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR TARGETING?

Consumers are still turning to traditional media sources for their news and entertainment. It is important to target these media outlets as the primary targets for your outreach.

However, the media is becoming increasingly complex with the convergence of blogging, wikis and other sources of information on the Internet. These outlets should not be ignored as they are powerful and emerging source of information for consumers.

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEDIA OUTLETS?



What makes one media outlet different from another is its audience. An “easy listening” radio station in Muncie, Indiana has a different audience from the *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*. The campus newspaper at the University of Maryland has a different audience than the *New York Times*. The *NASW News* has a different audience than the magazine of the American Bar Association.

Three adjectives commonly describe the word media are: national, local, and trade. These are used to define the audience. National media often refers to *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *NBC Nightly News*, *Good Morning America*, cable news programs, and National Public Radio (NPR), because these media have national audiences.

Local media cover a specific city, region, or area. Local media include neighborhood newspapers, citywide magazines, radio stations, local cable channels, and the local network affiliates such as NBC Channel 4 in Washington, D.C., the *Houston Chronicle* in Texas, or *Chicago Parent* that comes out weekly in Chicago.

Examples of trade media include the *NASW News*, *Social Work Today*, and *The New Social Worker*. Trade press address a specific audience, in this case, professional social workers.

**National news** ➔ story needs to appeal to a large audience. It can be a “local” story, but it needs to be able to be mirrored in other communities.

**Local news** ➔ story needs to appeal to the community. It is very effective to take a national story and refer to its local angle. Seek out local people who highlight the issue and use them as storytellers for the important points of the story.

**Trade news** ➔ story needs to appeal to the target audience, usually a specific profession. Timely news that directly effect professionals or those who work with them is useful for garnering attention from this media.

## VARIETY IN NEWS: HARD NEWS, OPINION, AND FEATURES

### Hard News

Ideally, all hard news would contain only facts, and the reader would draw his or her own conclusions. Often, however, we detect a bias in the hard news sections of a newspaper or the stories heard on the nightly news. That bias is what gives a newspaper, for example, the reputation of being conservative or liberal.

### Opinion

All opinions should appear on the opinion pages of the newspaper—editorial page and the op-ed pages—or be introduced as a commentary on the nightly news. Viewers and listeners should, in a perfect world, be told in advance that something is an opinion so that they can decide whether they agree or disagree with what is expressed. Radio talk shows usually revolve around the opinions of guests. Often the host also expresses an opinion.

### Feature

Feature stories—sometimes referred to as “soft” news—appear in “style” sections of newspapers and magazines. Also, nightly news programs have segments that are more “feature” than hard news. An example is the NBC Nightly News segment called “In Their Own Words” which gives an average person

the opportunity to talk about how a hard news event is affecting them personally.

Lines sometimes blur between features and hard news, in part because feature stories are often “hooked” to current hard news. For example, the media covers the War in Iraq from a strategy and outcome perspective, while it also might cover individual soldiers and how their lives and families are being affected by the war. This is where social workers can provide the feature story angle on a hard news story.

The feature story can be characterized as focusing on a human interest angle to a hard news story. Much of what social workers do falls into the feature category, unless experts are commenting on public policy issues.

## HOW IS MEDIA CHANGING?

In the last 15 years, how people receive their news and information has changed dramatically. More people are turning to the Internet for breaking news. An increasing number of people rely on cable news networks, which broadcast 24 hours a day. There is no “news cycle” anymore. No longer are people waiting for the morning newspaper or the evening news to learn about what is happening in their community and around the world. Because of this, the way that we pitch the media needs to change as well.



With the advent of 24 hour news operations, journalists need more information, more experts and more stories to fill their programs and Web sites. Learning the angle of each particular program or Web site and tailoring your pitch will enable effective outreach.

The newspaper industry is seeing a decline in print readership and an increase in online readership. Although many stories appear in the print and online counterparts of a newspaper, the way that an article is written for print can be different from the way that an article is written for the Web.



## THE GENERAL PUBLIC MUST UNDERSTAND THE STORY

It's the reporter's responsibility to make the story understandable to their audience. To do that, reporters often seek the help of the “expert” or “real people” whose circumstances exemplify the story. “Real people” do not use jargon or talk over people's heads. They help the general public build a picture of what is happening. An interview with a single mother using TANF, detailing her frustrations with trying to get and maintain a job while attending all the meetings and required classes to continue to receive assistance, helps us to better understand the complexities of the system.

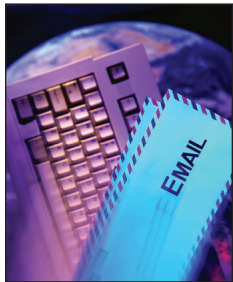
Often a reporter uses “experts” to put a story into context. Experts can provide numbers and an overview of a story. For example, an expert on the public welfare system can provide statistics and examples of the administrative challenges in the system and the history that brought about the current frustrations.

NASW is currently recruiting social workers from across the country to help tell the story of the profession to journalists and media outlets. As a professional social worker, it’s likely that at some point in your career, you will be considered an expert on a topic that’s being heavily reported in the news. If you are interested in speaking with the media, contact NASW Communications at [media@naswdc.org](mailto:media@naswdc.org). NASW has been able to place social workers in stories in outlets such as *CNN*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Oprah & Friends on XM Satellite Radio* to speak on issues important to the profession and social workers.

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## HOW TO GET YOUR MESSAGE HEARD

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### Targeting reporters by e-mail

Today, it’s so much easier to send e-mail than to pick up the phone or compose a letter. In fact, a majority of reporters prefer e-mail to phone and fax pitches. In order to get a reporter to pay attention to your e-mail, though, there are specific things you must do:

- When sending a press release to more than one reporter, *always* put the reporters’ e-mail addresses in the “blind courtesy copy” or “BCC” window. When possible, personalize individual e-mails with notes to specific reporters—this helps build relationships.
- Be specific in the subject line. Do not use social work jargon, and get right to the point.
- Send only one e-mail screen of copy. Be clear and concise in your message. Do not pitch a story unless you can clearly state the significance of that story to a reporter’s readers, and how that idea ties into a larger trend.
- If you have a lot of information, provide links in your e-mail so that reporters can go directly to the background or supporting facts on your Web site. This also helps ensure that the e-mail’s content is concise and easily accessible.
- Add contact sources, and note the information those contacts can provide. For example, if a social worker in the field can provide commentary related to your issue, contact that person in advance so that they are ready when the reporter calls. It’s also a good idea to identify an educator, researcher, or other expert who can provide statistics to back up your point of view.

Last but not least, know how to target the right reporter. Knowing who you are sending your e-mail to is the most important part of pitching a story. Research news outlets by reading/listening/watching, so that you know exactly who would best cover your issue.

If you don’t have access to media outlets outside your local area, you can contact the NASW Communications Department for a targeted media list by sending an e-mail to [media@naswdc.org](mailto:media@naswdc.org). Include an example of the story idea, so that we can help you target the right reporters.

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## HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE WITH OP-EDS

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An op-ed is one of the best tools for gaining visibility for an issue, as well as making social work a credible source on a variety of issues. But writing one and getting it published are often easier said than done. So, how do you accomplish those goals?

### Identify your message

First, identify your message. Be focused and clear. What is it that you want to happen in the end? Do you want legislators to do something, or just increase public understanding of an issue? Regardless of the end result, you need to be able to state your opinion in a clear, concise sentence. If you can’t, you need to continue to work on your message.

### Back it up with facts

Next, you need to express that opinion, and then back it up with facts. For example, if your message is that legislators should not cut money from the social service budget because it will be detrimental to families, then you need to supply examples. How many families use social services in your community now? How many jobs would be affected by the budget cuts? How much more would it cost your community in crisis care versus preventive care? You can usually find numbers and statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau at [www.census.gov/](http://www.census.gov/) or other government agencies. Think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution or the Urban Institute, often have research that is broken down geographically.

### Write for the reader

The standard way to make an argument is to state your main point, present evidence to support that opinion, and then offer a recommendation or conclusion. The more conversational you can make the writing, the better. Avoid clichés and jargon. Emphasize active verbs and forget the adjectives and adverbs, which only weaken writing. Explain why your position is better than the opposition.