



GET YOUR MESSAGE OUT

a short guide for
community organisations

Russ Grayson



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Russ Grayson, 2006

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TerraCircle is an international development consultancy working in the South West Pacific and Australia in: food security, livelihood development, training in small scale sustainable agriculture, community health, project management.



Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network

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Introducing... the media

THE MEDIA is a global entity made up of organisations, groups and individuals utilising news-gathering and communications technologies, production practices and ideas that interact to deliver information to the general public or to segments of it.

Print, electronic and online (also known as 'digital' because it is produced and delivered via digital technologies) are the three main forms of media.

Print media

Print media consists of:

- ▶ newspapers
- ▶ magazines and journals
- ▶ books
- ▶ brochures and similar, short publications with a limited number of pages.

Electronic media

Electronic media consists of radio and television, which are made up of public (the government owned but editorially independent Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the ABC, and the Special Broadcasting Service, SBS), as well as private and community broadcasters.

Radio includes podcasting (named after the Apple iPod MP3 player) in which a sound file is downloaded from a radio station or other website into a home computer and from there into a portable MP3 player. Avoiding the problem of missing a once-only broadcast, podcasting extends the life of radio programs, turning radio into a play-on-demand service.

Television is available via free-to-air broadcast networks in all of the metropolitan cities or via subscription cable service. Some programs are made available on DVD.

Digital or online media

The 'new media' is made possible by low-cost computers, digital still and video cameras, digital voice recorders, software, mobile telephone and internet services. Online media is distributed in digital form via the Internet. Digital material may be made available on recorded media such as DVD or compact disk (CD).

When digital devices — digital cameras, sound recorders, personal digital assistants (PDAs are handheld computers) are combined into a single device — a process known as 'convergence' — the converged tools enable citizens to take on a news gathering role and feed what they gather to conventional media or to post it on their own websites and weblogs.

Conventional print, television and radio media are 'one-to-many' transmissions of information. Online media offers the possibility of 'many-to-many' transmission because it can be made interactive. In this way, new media becomes a conversation.

It is true that anyone with the right digital tools can produce their own media product, however the reliability, independence and credibility of the information may remain in doubt unless the producers make use of conventional journalistic practices such as:

- ▶ the substantiation of information
- ▶ attribution of information to a source
- ▶ the checking of facts
- ▶ assessing the credibility of sources of news and information
- ▶ the editing process (to identify fact, assumption, outdated information and opinion and to identify these as such or to exclude them; the editor formats information according to 'useability' practices which make it accessible and easy to find and follow).

KATE ADIE (BBC),
on television news...

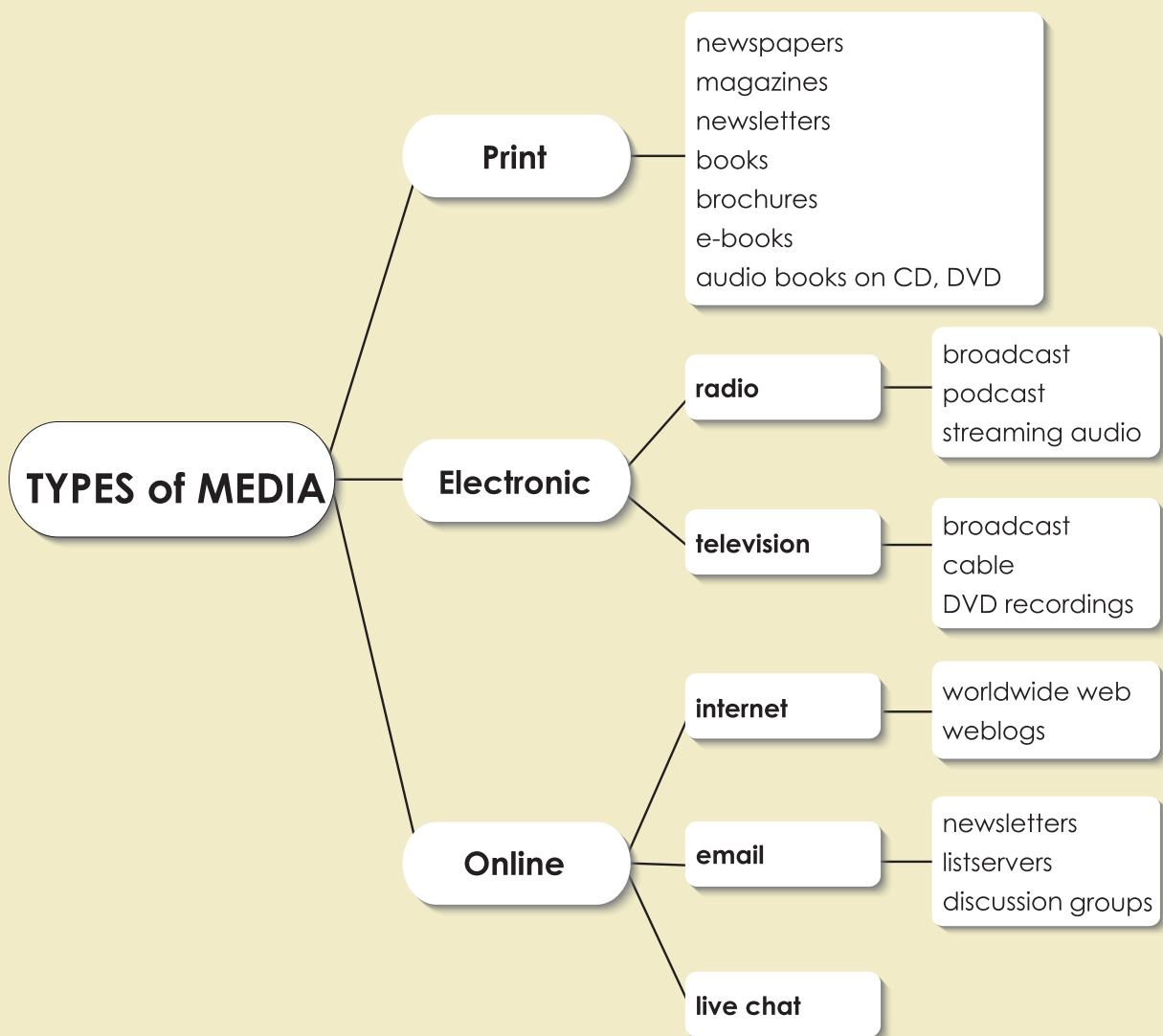
"... you have only got a minute or two... most of the world's events are meant to be compressed into about four hundred words, or as it was put years ago: a TV news item is an animated postcard home".

(Adie K, 2002; *The Kindness of Strangers*; *Headline Book Publishing*, London).

JOHN SIMPSON
(BBC foreign affairs journalist)...

"Those of us who have the job of providing people with information have a duty... to tell them as much, as widely, as deeply and as honestly as possible about what is going on in the world around them".

(Simpson J, 2002; *News From No Mans Land - Reporting the World*; *Pan Books*, UK).



The idea of newsworthiness

To be published, information passes through a number of people who have what are known as 'gatekeeper' roles.

Gatekeepers filter information by making judgements about its newsworthiness, some information being rejected, some passing through to publication. The journalist who gathers and writes the information is the first gatekeeper. The editor, who may assign the journalist to cover something or who may assess the journalists work for publication, is another gatekeeper.

Even when news passes through the gatekeepers, it may be bumped from publication at the last minute if something more important or if late-breaking news becomes available.

Journalists, photojournalists (stills photographers) or videojournalists (video photographers) are sent by media organisations to gather photographs, video, sound and information at events and press conferences and directly from newsmakers.

Only information considered 'newsworthy' is gathered and published. Newsworthiness is a concept that differs among media organisations — a women's magazine, for example, has little interest in current news; a metropolitan newspaper may have little interest in a new shopping centre in a suburb (a local newspaper may be interested, though).

A newsworthy item contains information relevant to the media organisation's readership or audience — the demographic it primarily caters to.

You can gain an understanding of what different media considers newsworthy by looking through their publication. Look, also, for columns in which upcoming, local events are listed to get your event in print or on the airwaves.

Write your news so it complies with the type of information a publication is interested in. Look for specialist pages and columns such as food, gardening and books and target the producer of the page with your information, if it is relevant. If you are promoting a new book, consider the arts programs on ABC Radio National. If interested, the producer is likely to want an interview with the author. The advantage of these programs is that they go out to a national listening audience and, perhaps, to an international audience via streamed media on the Internet and as podcasts.

A event may, in some significant way, illustrate a local reaction to, or impact of, a broader issue, making it of interest to local media which otherwise might not report the story. Community organisations may be able to gain publicity by exploiting this if they structure their information so that it illustrates the local consequences of the broader story.

The getting of publicity

Why seek publicity?

PUBLICITY can make an organisation better known and can attract greater numbers to its activities, however the seeking of publicity brings responsibilities and burdens, such as the need to:

- ▶ be available to speak to journalists, radio and television producers and researchers
- ▶ have something newsworthy to say — something to interest their audiences
- ▶ be regarded as a credible source of information.

Community-based organisations might seek publicity to:

- ▶ attract new members
- ▶ publicise events, workshops and courses
- ▶ inform local residents of the organisation's purpose and activities so as to dispel misinformation, rumour, concerns and fears
- ▶ consolidate their presence with local government, citizens and landowners
- ▶ advocate a solution to a problem or issue or promote a point of view, practice or activity.

The easiest way for small organisations to seek media coverage is through producing a media release and distributing it to appropriate media. The term 'press release' is a left-over from the days when newspapers dominated the reporting of information. The term 'media release' is now more common and is inclusive of print, electronic and online media.

Distribute your media release to the right organisations

If the subject of the press release is of local interest only, there is little point distributing it to metropolitan or national media, as they may not consider it newsworthy — it might not suit their readership or audience and might be considered too 'local'. Metropolitan newspapers, however, might have columns for local items — check this out.

Local items should be sent to local newspapers, local community radio stations and websites reporting local or regional news. You may also be able to access public service announcements on radio and the 'what's on' event listings of the local press and radio stations.

The media advisory

A 'media advisory' is a type of press release that notifies media of upcoming events.

The media advisory is of no more than a single A4 page and explains:

- ▶ what is to happen (eg. book or program launch, media event, conference etc)
- ▶ when it is scheduled
- ▶ where it is to take place
- ▶ where the media can get more information (spokesperson's phone number, email etc).

A press advisory is issued before the event to let the media know it is to happen. A press release may then be issued at the event to provide detail.

Producing the press release

A press release is a statement to the media to inform it of something that may interest their readers or audience and that they may consider to be newsworthy. Its purpose is to gain media coverage.

NEWS is a product rather than an unmediated and objective portrayal of reality. The practices of individual journalists and the organisations they work for determines how a newsworthy event is presented to readers, listeners or viewers.

"Big media has lost its monopoly on the news, thanks to the Internet. Now that it's possible to publish in real time to a worldwide audience, a new breed of grassroots journalist are taking the news into their own hands. Armed with laptops, cell phones and digital cameras, these readers-turned-reporters are transforming the news from a lecture into a conversation.

"We are only beginning to understand the consequences of this technological development... faster networks and nearly ubiquitous cameras in the hands of average people means that big events... will be seen and captured by several or many people. Keeping secrets, moreover, will be more difficult for business and government. Journalism in the 21st century will be fundamentally different from the Big Media that prevails today. "

Gillmor D, 2004; We the Media; O'Reilly Media Inc, California. ISBN 0-596-00733-7

EDDIE ADAMS, photographer...
"Photography is the only thing in the world where there is instant communication and I think that the still photo is the most powerful weapon in the world, bar none.

"You could run all the TV shows you want but people don't remember them, they are on show only for that one time that it is put on TV.

"A photograph is here today, it is there tomorrow; it is in the history books... that split-second image remains in your mind because you look at it and study it."

Find an angle

In some circumstances, you may be able to link your idea to national or state issues, but attempt this only if you can make a fairly direct and specific link. Consider whether it illustrates the impact of something of national or state significance or whether it offers a solution or unique angle on it.

An 'angle' is a way of looking at something in the news. For example, Sydney's water crisis of 2005-2006 could be reported from the angle of:

- ▶ politics — state government and opposition moves, local government and community group campaigning
- ▶ science — the hydrology and geology of the Sydney Basin, rainfall, aquifer recharge and the availability of water
- ▶ technology — water treatment and conservation technologies — desalinisation technologies, water reprocessing
- ▶ economics — the cost of water saving and processing; public and private investment in infrastructure
- ▶ the environment — water recycling, possible impacts of desalinisation or excessive groundwater extraction
- ▶ public health — the palatability and safety of drinking recycled sewage, possible contaminants in groundwater pumped for drinking.

Think about the benefits of writing your press release to emphasise different angles.

Think about a hook

The first job of journalism is to find out, communicate accurately and be trusted...

Hargraves I, 2003: Journalism — Truth or Dare?; Oxford University Press, UK., ISBN 0-19-280274-7

A 'hook' is something in your press release that sets it apart from other news of the type and is designed to attract media attention and increase the probability of publication.

A school using a community garden as part of its academic studies, for example, could be a hook that attracts the attention of an editor. A public figure launching an organisation's program could provide the hook that attracts media coverage; their presence, public profile and background is brings newsworthiness to the event.

Characteristics of the media release

The media release contains information in sufficient detail to substantiate claims that it makes. Usually no longer than two A4 pages, the release is written as a short article using the 'inverted pyramid' newswriting style (more later). This is a difference with the media advisory that merely warns media about something that is going to happen in future.

Media releases should:

- ▶ appear on organisational letterhead and with the organisation's logo to increase the release's credibility
- ▶ provide information about the 'five W's and an H' of journalism — explain who, what, where, when, why and how
- ▶ focus on only a single subject
- ▶ include contact details, especially a phone number (which must be accessible during working hours), as well as postal and email addresses and website URL (so the reporter can learn more about the organisation and check that it is representative and a bona-fide entity — is it a real organisation or just two people with a telephone and website?)
- ▶ carry a date of issue at the top (so the reporter can see that it current)
- ▶ carry an embargo date if the organisation does not want publicity before that date — to coincide with some event, for instance; there is no legal obligation for the media to observe an embargo, however editors will generally do so
- ▶ be written in the inverted pyramid news writing format

- ▶ include quotes from your spokesperson — eg. Ms Campbell said: “The garden will be open to all provided they follow our guidelines”; quotes make the text more interesting than a simple journalist’s narrative by introducing a different voice
- ▶ use the active voice in writing — eg. say “Ms Campbell gained the support of the Mayor after Tuesday’s meeting”, not “the support of the Mayor was gained following a meeting with Ms Daniell last Tuesday”.
- ▶ add a footnote to let the editor know if photographs or broadcast quality video is available or whether arrangements can be made for a photo or video shoot; they may want a photo of your spokesperson but more than likely will be interested in action shots that include people — news, essentially, is about people; magazines, especially, like to accompany articles with photographs — visual communication illustrates what is in the text and attracts people to articles
- ▶ add a ‘more information’ footnote with the spokesperson’s name, landline and mobile phone numbers
- ▶ contain a brief description of the organisation and its role.

JOHN SIMPSON (BBC)...

“Television pictures do not necessarily distort meaning, but they can be deeply misleading. The fault does not lie in the pictures but in the assumptions the audience makes about them.

“We all seem to do this business of generalising from the few wisps of information we glean about another place from news programmes... it isn’t television’s fault: television merely gives us a more immediate, a more graphic sense of something... the fault lies in our interpretation of the pictures — our sense that they are just a brief glimpse of something much more widespread and even more alarming going on.

“Television is an intensive medium: it heightens the significance of everything it looks at, merely by paying attention to it.”

Writing the inverted pyramid

The inverted pyramid is used for news writing because it presents information succinctly and is easily edited to fit available space in a newspaper or air time on radio or television. Originally, it was adopted for newspapers because it got across the main points of a story in the limited space available in newspaper columns.

The inverted pyramid is a useful form for community group newsletters and for media releases.

The head

First, there must be a headline at the top of your media release. This has to be succinct, catchy and summarise the main message.

The head:

- ▶ is presented in a typeface larger — perhaps around 20 point — than the body text, which could be 10 or 12 point (‘point’, abbreviated as ‘pt’ in word processing software, is a typesetter’s measure of the height of a letter; word processing software allows you to set point size)
- ▶ may be centred on the page or ranged left
- ▶ may be all upper case lettering or lower case in bold typeface
- ▶ may be stacked — a short, main head to attract attention followed by a smaller typeface, subsidiary head that gives more detail — eg. **main head:** Minister tells farmers they have no future; **subsidiary head:** but minister is the one to go.

The lead

The ‘tip’ of the inverted pyramid — the ‘lead’ — contains the main message of the media release. It discloses what the release is about. The lead consists of the first paragraph which is stated briefly and clearly. It can be stated dramatically, for impact, providing there is no exaggeration.

The headline and your lead paragraph will influence whether you get the attention of the editor or reporter. Both are of critical importance and should be written in a dynamic but simple style which offers an unusual angle of the subject.

By the end of the first two paragraphs, you should have established the importance of your news.

DAVID BRILL, Australian videojournalist,
speaking on journalism...

*"I think you can do some damn good
things now and then... we can still get
out and cover stories, give perspective,
do something. There is power in this type
of work."*

The body

The rest of the inverted pyramid forms the body of the media release. It:

- ▶ expands on the main message by providing relevant detail
- ▶ offers evidence to support the main message — giving reasons and explanation
- ▶ mentions specific examples to illustrate the main message
- ▶ includes quotes from the spokesperson — use quotation marks to denote the direct speech of a quote (eg. Community garden spokeswoman, Emma Jones, said: "The new garden will provide a place for local people to grow fresh food and will become a social focus for the neighbourhood").

Where the media release runs over the page, write 'more' at the end of previous pages to let journalists know that there is additional content overpage.

The end

The final paragraph 'ties off' the release but contains no new or critical information. In the inverted pyramid structure of news writing, editors may cut material from the bottom to make it fit the available space.

Things that make a difference

It is important to provide information which is true and which does not mislead.

The discovery by journalists and editors of untruth or of bending the truth will discredit your organisation and lower its credibility, perhaps affecting the opportunity for future publicity.

When to submit information

Media organisations have their own production cycle.

Metropolitan newspapers have a daily news cycle. These are morning papers, and articles for the next morning's publication are written during the previous day, final selection being made at a late afternoon or early evening editorial conference, the paper being printed during the night and delivered to newsagencies in the early morning. Weekend news (longer feature stories), employment, real estate, lifestyle and other supplements are produced during the week.

Some local papers publish only one, two or three editions a week. Magazines are sometimes weekly but usually monthly or quarterly. Online news production may be continuous.

In general, deliver the media release around a week before an event and call the journalist or editor three days before to promote your story to them.

Ask organisations about their deadlines for submitting a press release.

Follow-up your release

Depending on the production schedule of the media you seek publicity with, it is a good idea to follow-up the issue of your media release with a phone call to the editor (or producer if a radio or television program). If you have their name and number, call a particular journalist, especially if they report a round relevant to you (a 'round' is a specialised area of reporting).

Explain who you are and what organisation you represent. Remind them that you sent a media release but do not expect them to remember it — they receive many. Your call is an opportunity to promote your news to reporters or editors; explain what your news is about and why they may wish to cover it. Offer to re-send the release. Also offer the opportunity for an interview and to supply additional information. Make sure they have your number.

Maintain a media contact file

Spokespeople should retain names, phone numbers, email addresses and other information on all of their media contact in an address book or media file.

Keep a clipping file of your media coverage.

Example - media release

Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network

PO Box 371 Fairlight NSW 2094.

P: 02 9511 1111 M: 0414 065 111

E: info@pacific-edge.info www.communitygarden.org.au

Contact details

MEDIA RELEASE

Bold heading identifies what the reader is looking at

Date of issue: 11.2.06

Embargoed until:

Date of issue and embargo, if any

Community gardens reduce crime in estates

Headline — bold, larger typeface

COMMUNITY GARDENS play a significant role in reducing the incidence of crime on public housing estates in NSW, according to a study by two university researchers.

Lead paragraph summarises main information

The study was conducted over two and a half years on nine public housing estates by Dr Bruce Judd and Dr Rob Samuels of the AHURI UNSW-UWS Research Centre.

The researchers found that a social approach to crime reduction, including better design, lighting, on-site housing managers, friendly neighbourhood police and cooperation between government and residents — and the presence of community gardens — was effective in reducing crime.

Body of media release provides explanation, evidence, quotes attributed to spokesperson

There is one, at most two, ideas per paragraph

Sentences and paragraphs are short

"In many public housing estates, people's territories are not defined," Dr Judd said.

"There is no patch that's yours to look after. You get these no-man's-land spaces that end up being littered with shopping trolleys, rubbish and dead cars. This causes a downward spiral of physical deterioration, low morale and stigmatisation. In areas of high disadvantage, community becomes critical, You need empathetic people on the ground actively tackling the issues."

Direct quote attributed to source

Community gardens are a way to reclaim ambiguous space, according to Dr Judd.

"Occupy space, secure it, light it well and get people actively using it," is Dr Judd's prescription for reclaiming the urban no-man's land of housing estates.

The Department of Housing estate at Claymore, near Campbelltown, is an example of how community gardens can help rehabilitate public housing estates. There, residents have started an extensive community food garden... (provide detail)

Specific example supports main message

(...more information may follow; add 'more' if copy extends over the page... this leads to the last paragraph...)

According to the researchers, the safety of housing estates may lie in the social cohesiveness encouraged by their gardens.

MORE INFORMATION:

Rosie Campbell

02 9511 1111 M: 0414 065 111

Where more information can be found

Photo opportunities in community gardens can be arranged.

The Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network educates, advises and advocates for members involved in or supporting community food gardens.

Description of the organisation's work (not a mission statement)

Other ways to get publicity

The media conference

The media conference is a difficult publicity strategy for community-based, small business or local groups to pull off. It is more often used by politicians and by large organisations, such as well-known environmental lobby or business groups that have media pulling power.

To be successful, a media conference:

- ▶ must present news that is important enough to attract major media organisations — remember, attracting media attention is competitive and you may be competing against the major news makers; presents news of metropolitan interest
- ▶ may attract media interest if a public figure appears at the media conference to deliver the organisation's message
- ▶ may interest local media when something that affects the local area is to be announced.

The media event

The media event is an attention-grabbing act designed to attract media attention and to offer action-oriented photo opportunities.

An example: in the 1990s, Greenpeace organised a media event when activists attempted to block drains taking allegedly polluted waste water from industry on Sydney's Kurnell Peninsula to the sea. The event was kept secret until a short time before its starting time. Television and stills photographers were able to obtain dramatic images of Greenpeace activists, clad in protective clothing, doing their work. A media release was presented to reporters on the scene. The action images increased the possibility that the event and the issue would receive coverage.

The Greenpeace example shows that media events are manufactured acts that draw attention to wider issues — the inappropriate disposal of industrial waste water, in this case. It is the big issue that is the focus; the media event is only a dramatic act that draws attention to it.

Media events do not have to be as dramatic as the Greenpeace example, however they must be constructed so that they provide interesting photographic opportunity. A spokesperson must be present to interpret what is going on to the media and must be knowledgeable enough to provide reliable information. Such events require considerable skill to carry out successfully.

Many organisations do not deal in matters that have great dramatic appeal, however less-ambitious media events can be organised. For example, the mayor of Randwick was invited to open the Randwick Community Organic Garden, an event important enough for the local newspaper to send a reporter and photographer. Although this was borderline as a media event, it succeeded in attracting the attention desired and was simple to organise.

Media events:

- ▶ require meticulous organisation, coordination and skills
- ▶ must be about an issue significant enough to attract either regional or local media attention
- ▶ are best attempted by organisations with a high level of organising ability
- ▶ are best attempted by organisations that are well known.

In the case of both the media conference and media event, much effort is put into alerting the media through press releases and follow-up.

Language — how we communicate

A few points about the use of language in press releases and articles:

- ▶ **overcapitalisation** is a bad habit. Lose it. Only 'proper nouns' — the unique or individual name or the title of somebody, thing or organisation — is capitalised. Thus: Ms Gamble (an individual's name and a proper noun — capitalise), an educator (a common, not a proper noun — no capitalisation) with SEED International (proper noun — the name of an organisation) will negotiate with the Prime Minister (proper noun) and state premiers (a collective noun — no caps, they are a class of people — 'caps' is an abbreviation of 'capitals') to find a solution acceptable to local government (collective noun — no caps) and to develop a policy (a common noun, not the proper name of anything).

Do not capitalise occupational titles such as chairman, managing director, coordinator. The head office of a country or state and the title of government ministers is capitalised — Prime Minister, Premier, President, the Treasurer, the Minister for Certain Things.

- ▶ **do not abbreviate.** Thus: Northey **Street** - not St; **reference** - not ref; **department** - not dept; **per cent** - not %. Some acronyms are widely known and may be used without spelling them out in full — UN, UNDP, UNESCO, NATO, UK, USA, ABC, ASIO etc.

Use the full title of an organisation when it first appears and add, in brackets, the abbreviation which will be used in subsequent mentions. For example, use 'Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network (ACFCGN)' at first use, then ACFCGN or 'the Network' after that.

Honorifics may be abbreviated: Mr Neville, Dr Trainer, Sr Jones, Bob Neil MP (member of parliament), Monrahan PM, Cr Laden (local government councillor). In your press release, use the honorific after the first use of a person's name — Robin Chudley becomes Ms (or Mrs/ Miss) Chudley in subsequent mentions. Women are usually given the choice of Ms, Miss or Mrs.

- ▶ **write in simple, everyday language** — eg. 'some crops are likely to fail because of soil acidity'; not: 'the pH balance of the soil suggests failure when it comes to specific crops'
- ▶ **be concise**, not wordy, and use a dynamic turn of phrase — eg. 'management will use the funds to support the regional teams'; not: 'the allocation of funding by the state government will allow management to address issues of underfunding common among teams in the regions' — this is bureaucratic babble that confuses and obscures meaning and displays an inability to communicate effectively; it is poor English expression
- ▶ **avoid the use of jargon** unless writing for a specific readership — eg. 'the surfboard design is not suitable for beginners'; not: 'the swallowtail will cause grommets to wipe out on steep right-handers' (which would be alright for a surfing magazine)
- ▶ **use everyday and widely-understood terms** to replace technical terms; if their use is unavoidable, a brief definition of the technical term should be provided, assuming it is not widely-known; eg: MP3 is now a widely known technical term and need not be written in full, but 'hyperfocal distance' is less-known and is better described as 'zone of focus'
- ▶ **avoid the use of clichés** such as 'back to square one'; 'beat around the bush'; 'love child'; 'do or die'; 'survival of the fittest'; 'in the final analysis'; 'move the goal posts'; don't allude to what you mean by using vague and tired clichés — say exactly what you mean
- ▶ **avoid overused and misused terms of speech** such as the word 'basically', as in 'basically, what we want to do is...'; except when using the words in their true meaning (basically means 'brought down to the fundamental element'; 'at the basis of' or similar); some speakers sprinkle their speech with such terms — don't do it, especially in writing because, basically, it is unnecessary
- ▶ **use short sentences, short paragraphs and simple words** to be easily understood; use action verbs to produce lively text and arrange sentences so that they flow better — eg. not: 'Ms Morton, coordinator of the garden', but 'garden coordinator, Ms Morton'.

It's the new media

Digital offers a huge expansion in the amount of data which can be forced through any communications network and allows it to be manipulated and displayed upon a range of cheap and simple desktop, hand held or living room devices...

since the telecommunications network is global, leaving aside issues of communications poverty in large tracts of the world, journalism as become, almost at a stroke, a global enterprise... the global nature of the new communications network means that individuals can consume journalism made all over the world and discuss it, interactively, across national boundaries...
Hargraves I, 2003: Journalism — Truth or Dare?; Oxford University Press, UK. ISBN 0-19-280274-7

Blogging... permits anyone to establish a real time, online personal platform for use as a diary or pulpit to the world... a former editor of New Republic describes blogging as "the first journalistic model that harnesses rather than merely exploits the true democratic nature of the web"... blogging and digital storytelling will acquire even greater potential as higher speed communications networks take shape... there is good reason to hope that they might help fill the gaps in local and community news networks... no professional communicator should doubt the power of the internet in the hands of the curious and determined citizen...

Hargraves I, 2003:
Journalism — Truth or Dare?

Around the middle years of the 1990s, the media world started to change. Nobody knew it then, but the dominance of the big metropolitan newspapers and broadcast television were soon to be challenged. Something new was afoot in the world and it was called the Internet.

Today, online or digital media are rapidly becoming the media of choice for increasing numbers of people. This trend is raising questions in the editorial rooms of the big papers, questions about declining numbers of readers and the challenge that online media presents to classified advertising — the revenue base of newspapers. Broadcast television, too, is wondering about its future in digital media universe. It pins its hopes on the potential of digital television.

The challenge to both of these established media is that they are 'push' media that pushes a signal and a message out to whoever can be motivated to read or watch. In contrast, online digital media is trending towards interactivity and participation. It is becoming conversational.

This presents a challenge to conventional journalism too — what is the future of professional journalism in an age when anyone with a computer, the right software, a telephone line and a website publish their views? Has the era of the citizen journalist arrived?

Such a scenario is starting to unfold and forward-looking professional journalists are investigating how their professional practices can translate into a new journalism that is more of a conversation than a lecture. It is becoming clear that websites, whether those of professional or citizen journalists, are more reliable and credible when they adopt the professional practices of the editing of information for factuality and readability, substantiation of information, fairness and clarity of argument. Professional journalists are finding credible roles for themselves in online journalism because they have successfully translated their professional processes into the new medium.

Online media for small organisations

Those who work in community-based, not-for-profit or small business organisations can be participants in the new media. Such participation, however, demands time and resources. Organisational managers and members would do well to seriously consider such a commitment. They should think about setting up an online presence and the ongoing task of maintaining it. A starting point is to develop a communication strategy to define the **why**, **what** and **how** of communicating their messages (see following).

The website is the most useful way to get our information about your organisation. It is available, globally, 24 hours a day, but it requires frequent updating of information to attract repeat and new visitors. For groups in which the discussion of issues or other things is important, the email listserv is a useful communications technology.

The digital slideshow is another useful information format, especially when attending conferences, expos and seminars. Powerpoint or similar software is widely available.

Some points to consider:

- ▶ presentation visuals supplement what the presenter says; seldom are they the main message
- ▶ avoid more than around 16 words to a slide — no pages of boring, difficult to read text or detailed diagrams to tranquilise your audience
- ▶ use visual communication — a photograph with a few dot points that summarise the verbal presentation of information — the main means of conveying information at presentations
- ▶ make very limited use of Powerpoint transitions and sound effects — they easily look gimmicky and distract from the presentation; keep it simple.

Following is an outline of different digital media and points for small organisations to consider in selecting the most appropriate.

Digital media formats — opportunities & constraints

MEDIA	OPPORTUNITIES	CONSTRAINTS
Website Provides easy access to information. Requires skills in visual communication, writing, editing, photography and image processing. Internet the first and primary information source for increasing numbers of people.	24 hour global access to your information. Low cost authoring software (including open source Wiki, Content Management System software) Inclusion of slide shows, video (for broadband users) and digital slide shows. Attach RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication) to notify new information.	High cost of capable, professional software or professional authoring and maintenance service. Skills required. Cost of ISP (Internet Service Provider) to host website. Time and effort of regular updating.
Weblog Often shortened to 'blog', a website usually in the form of a sequential diary or log. Can be divided into segments. Useful for frequent posting of short passages of information.	24 hour global access to your information. Low cost when weblog hosted in software providers website. Free or low cost software. Ease of placing material online. Fewer skills needed than some websites. RSS feed notifies new information.	Time and effort of regular updating. Cost of ISP (Internet Service Provider) to host weblog if site hosted on own website.
Email newsletter Text format communication of information. Email news brief links to organisation's website.	Economical to produce. Ease of distribution.	Time and effort of production. Less participatory — correspondents have to rely on editor to place material.
Email listserver Email-based communication in conversational form.	Online conversation — participatory. Need host organisation to place listserver online. Low cost.	May require moderation > time.
Podcasting Radio on demand. The convenience and useability of portable, verbal information.	Verbal presentation of information — like production for radio. Downloadable to personal computer and portable MP3 players. Useability of audio on demand > listeners use when it suits them. Useful for interview, commentary and documentary productions. Download from organisation's website. Video podcasting potential (need broadband connection).	Skills required — radio production, sound editing, podcast production. Software (sound editing) required plus microphone, computer etc. Regular posting of new material required. Need website to make podcasts available online for downloading. Need broadband connection for speed of loading podcasts to Worldwide Web.
Digital slideshow For mainly images with limited text.	Low cost, ease of production. Portability. Place on websites, CD, DVD. Useable for presentations at seminars etc.	Needs software, skill. Cost of software (Microsoft Powerpoint for Windows or Mac; Apple Keynote for Mac; Open Office (open source, free suite of office programs includes presentation software); others.
Publication on CD, DVD Long-lasting record of information on cheap format.	Distribute free or sell. Can include e-books, digital slide shows, video, text, podcasts, animations, stills photographs, diagrams and illustrations. Portability and low cost of distribution.	Cost of duplication and distribution. Skills required to produce content and compile CD or DVD.
Video DVD	Visual presentation of information. Plays on domestic DVD players, computers. Can include slide show, animations.	Cost of software, equipment. Time to shoot, edit, produce DVD. High cost of professional video production. Cost of reproduction, distribution.

"The whole world is watching" proclaimed Medium Cool, the 1960s film about television journalism. The media's global reach was just starting then, but today it is reality with instant pictures and audio thanks to global communications satellite coverage, video phones, satellite phones and, of course, the mobile phone network.

This is a new mediasphere. It is interactive, conversational, participatory even, and we can't see exactly where it is leading. For media mavens, this really is an exciting time.

Sometimes spin comes in a form where a particular news story is given a sharp slant towards — the government line, for example...

Donna McLachlan, presenter, The Culture of Journalism, ABC Radio

Spin is a concept. It's just persuasion under another name.

Stephen Stockwell, lecturer and journalist (speaking on ABC Radio)

Create a communications strategy

A STRATEGY is a plan or policy designed to achieve a long term, overall aim. The communications strategy is formulated in general terms and outlines the way an organisation will seek media coverage and the key messages for spokespeople to get across. A communications strategy can form part of a public relations policy.

Only foreseeable situations can be planned for in developing a communications strategy. Unfortunately, the world has a habit of throwing up the unanticipated. Thus, a strategy can at best be a guide as it might not offer solutions to all situations involving contact with the media or public.

You should have worked out your organisation's aims and objectives before developing a communications strategy. A plan of action or project management plan should be in existence to guide the organisation's work, its schedule, budgeting and monitoring.

Avoid spin

Spin can be defined as the manipulation of perceptions through the use of partial (half-truths), slanted (emphasising one or a small number of aspects while ignoring or downgrading others), unsubstantiated (without evidence) or false information (otherwise known as lies).

Spin, thanks to its overuse by politicians and malfunctioning corporations, has a very bad name and is highly suspect. It reflects on the ethics, or lack of them, of the perpetrator. It really is best to avoid it.

What goes into a communications strategy?

A communications strategy developed by an organisation identifies:

- ▶ the purpose the organisation seeks media coverage (eg. advocacy, public education, gaining public trust, organisational growth, gaining a voice as a commentator, political influence)
- ▶ relevant media to seek publicity through (eg. local radio and press; a website)
- ▶ the manner in which the media will be communicated with (eg. honestly and with the intent of building good relations with media organisations and, through them, the public, is a good start)
- ▶ what key messages the organisation will attempt to get across (eg. that it has a positive role in improving the social and ecological amenity of the area)
- ▶ examples of statements that could be used by spokespeople; these are guides only and not to be memorised and recited — that will just make you look silly.

The communications strategy

First, let's think about ethics — those principles that guide our own and the organisation's behaviour. In developing your communications strategy, ethics are a useful starting point but need not appear in the strategy itself.

The underlying ethics of the communications strategy might include:

- ▶ to be honest in dealings with the media and the public
- ▶ to be accurate within the limits of available information
- ▶ to provide adequate information to encourage understanding and insight
- ▶ to be open, acknowledging the public right to know and accountability to partner groups, donors and the public.

The headings on the next page commonly appear in a communications strategy. They are only the most common points an organisation needs to think about in formulating a communications strategy. You might add more that are specific to your organisation. An example is found following the next page.

Points to consider for your communications strategy

HEADING	EXPLANATION	FILL IN FOR YOUR ORGANISATION
Purpose of the communications strategy	<p>This describes why you are developing a strategy.</p> <p>eg. The purposes of a strategy may be to: provide adequate, accurate and timely information about your organisation; to promote the organisation and its programs; to engender public trust and confidence in the organisation.</p>	
Audience	<p>The audience is the demographic targeted by the communications strategy.</p> <p>eg. It might include: the interested public; donors and potential donors; media organisations that might report the activities of your organisation.</p>	
Existing use of media	<p>Describe the present use of the media by your organisation, if any.</p>	
Main messages	<p>Describe the main ideas you want to get across about your organisation. Make sure you can back them up with examples or evidence.</p> <p>Produce a brief statement around a limited number of main ideas.</p>	
Short statement	<p>Produce a short statement about the aims, objectives and activities of your organisation. Sum up what your organisation does or intends to do in simple, comprehensible language. Use the short statement when asked what the organisation does.</p> <p>eg. 'The Food Fairness Alliance advocates and educates about food issues in the Sydney region.'</p>	
Message points	<p>These are brief and fact filled and are not recited verbatim. They are used as a prompt by spokespeople talking to the media or the public.</p>	
Media	<p>Under this heading is assessed types of media of potential use by your organisation and the opportunities and constraints regarding them.</p> <p>eg. brochures, printed newsletters, email listservers and newsletters, website, static displays, posters, copy and photographs for the media.</p>	

Example

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY Kastom Gaden Association, Solomon Islands

Audience

The audience which the communications plan primarily caters for is consists of:

- ▶ the interested public in Australia and other countries, especially in the South Pacific
- ▶ NGO staff
- ▶ donors and potential donors
- ▶ people interesting in sustainable tropical agriculture, seed saving and seed networks
- ▶ those interested in international development assistance.

Existing use of media

Information about the KGA is presently provided through:

- ▶ a printed newsletter published on an ad-hoc basis
- ▶ a Worldwide Web site
- ▶ presentations to organisations and at seminars
- ▶ email to interested individuals and on email listservs, including media releases and brief newsletters.

The message

These are provided as guidance to spokespeople and may be added to as needed.

Core messages may be summarised as:

- ▶ on the whole, the KGA has been successful in moving towards its objectives (evidence from monitoring and evaluations — see the KGP evaluation *Blue Seas and Bush Gardens*)
- ▶ the program's approach to development assistance is evolving as staff learn from their experience (evidence — the adoption of PRA [Participatory Rural Appraisal] and PTD [Participatory Technology Development with farmers] methodologies and the more recent focus on developing rural livelihoods as an addition to the existing focus on improving food security)
- ▶ the KGA offers replicable models for grassroots agricultural development in the South Pacific (evidence — funding from the Secretariat for the Pacific Community to establish the Melanesian Farmer First Network as a means of spreading the experience and learnings of KGA)
- ▶ the KGA focuses on training members of village communities to develop their own food security and on the development of agriculture-based livelihoods as a source of monetary income (evidence — projects and programs started since 2000)
- ▶ the program has a focus on improving the nutritional health of village communities.

Short statement

The short statement summarises the program in a general way. A short statement to use when asked about the KGA:

‘The KGA is a program of agricultural training designed to assist South Pacific communities achieve nutritional health, food security and to develop agriculture-based livelihoods.’

Message points

Message points are used as a prompt when talking to the media or other organisations/ individuals. Message points about the KGA include:

- ▶ the KGA focuses on nutritional health, food security and ecologically sustainable methods of village agriculture and livelihoods based on this
- ▶ nutritional health and food security are prerequisites to any further development a community may decide to take
- ▶ the year 2000 security crisis in the Solomon Islands showed that village food security provides a social ‘safety net’ in times of crisis.

Approach -

- ▶ the KGA uses participatory methods to encourage self-help, to ensure that techniques are appropriate to village communities and to encourage ‘ownership’ of the program by local communities
- ▶ the KGA combines modern and traditional knowledge.

Media

Following is an assessment of media potentially useable by the KGP support team:

Brochures - the design of a 3-fold general information brochure is recommended.

Printed newsletter - not feasible on a scheduled basis due to lack of funding.

Presentations - presentations to interested groups and at conferences is feasible; a Powerpoint presentation should be prepared.

Static display - design of an A1-size, poster-based static display is feasible but printing depends on the provision of a no or low-cost service.

Email - the use of email to answer enquiries about the KGP and to promote KGP activities is economical, achievable and is done at present.

Provision of copy to media - the provision of copy — text and photographs — for placement in newsletters and magazines is achievable and has been done; experienced KGA people in Honiara or Australia are available for interview by journalists.

Program documentation - the documentation of evaluation of the KGA is publicly available and has the potential to promote the program.

Training manuals - a number of training manuals have been published with AusAID funding; they are useful in communicating the methodology and focus of the program.

Website - KGA has a section on the TerraCircle international development assistance consultancy’s website in Australia (www.terracircle.org.au); content needs to be produced on a more regular basis as new material encourages repeated visits by those interested in the KGA’s activities. The website is an economical way to keep KGA before the interested public and donor organisations.

Conferences - KGA personnel have presented papers and reports at conferences in the Pacific and Asia regions and to an FAO (UN Food and Agriculture Organisation) conference in Rome. This is an important means of highlighting the work of the agency and of making contacts with other organisations and potential donors; attendance at conferences should be continued.

Find out more...

Books

- ▶ **The Weblog Handbook**; Rebecca Blood, 2002; Perseus Publishing, USA.
Producing your own weblog.
- ▶ **Release the Hounds**; Christine Fogg, 2005; Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW.
A guide to research for journalists and writers.
- ▶ **We the Media**; Dan Gillmor, 2004; O'Reilly Media, California.
Citizen journalism, the new media and the future.
- ▶ **Style Manual** ; AGPS, 2002; John Wiley and Sons, Australia
All you need to know about writing, editing, legals, designing, illustrating your publication; a useful reference.

Online

Many of the following websites offer an email newsletter and an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed.

- ▶ **www.digitaljournalist.org** — authoritative website on digital media, newsgathering, techniques and the new media by experienced journalist; high quality, credible
- ▶ **www.hypergene.net/wemedia/weblog.php** — the weblog associated with the book *We the Media* (see above - Books) about where the new media is heading, were anyone able to answer that
- ▶ **http://blog.contentious.com** — Amy Garham's informative and very useful weblog on digital communications, the media, techniques, new communications technologies and a great deal more - recommended
- ▶ **http://nswwriterscentre.org.au** — information, workshops, courses in fiction and nonfiction writing; see writers centres in other states
- ▶ **http://www.journoz.com/weblog** — good source of information on journalism in Australia including sources of information
- ▶ **http://rsf.org.au** — Reporters Without Borders, an international organisation monitoring the state of the media worldwide, risk to media workers and government attitude to free media; download free *Handbook for Bloggers and Cyber-Dissidents*
- ▶ **www.poynter.org** — useful US-based organisation providing research material, information, instructional material; recommended
- ▶ **http://efa.org.au** — Australian end of international online media monitoring and advocacy organisation — Electronic Frontiers Australia.

Useful

- ▶ **http://en.wikipedia.org** — very useful and authoritative, participatory online encyclopedia.

How information becomes news

