



OPPORTUNITY

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Drive public innovation by reigniting civil society

**AMPLIFY YOUR ACTIVISM:
Sharing Some of Our Best Lessons on
How to Use the Media as an Advocacy Tool**

The media frames and shapes public discussion. It is a powerful platform available to civil society that can speak directly to those with influence, put pressure on decision-makers to make positive policy changes, and inspire people to advocate for transformation in their communities. However, the voice of community organisations on the issues concerning them is often not heard – pitching stories to the media and speaking in interviews can be difficult and intimidating, especially for those with limited resources. This learning brief shares some of DGMT's learnings from our dealings with the media, spotlighting how op-eds and interviews can be a powerful advocacy tool that other civil society organisations – big and small – can be using too.

The media provides a space for people to tell their stories to the nation. For community organisations and mobilisers, it can be a significant tool in shifting the public eye toward the meaningful work they do, and creating awareness of critical societal issues. Media advocacy, or the strategic use of the media to advance a social or public policy initiative¹, has been proven to be an effective instrument for educating the public and policy-makers as well as winning support for policies designed to better communities².

Op-eds – or opinion pieces that appear in newspapers but also on digital news platforms and which represent a range of voices and perspectives – and their follow-up interviews are powerful mechanisms for community organisations to

engage with the public. What becomes a major challenge for these organisations, however, is how, with limited resources, to convince the press that the issues concerning them are important and deserve coverage. Marketing and communication are far from priorities for many community organisations who dedicate their resources to doing work on the ground, occupied with preventing issues like stunting or ensuring children can go to school. For these reasons, the power of the media remains underutilised in civil society.

In this brief, notes from various training workshops and interviews with DGMT staff members inform five lessons around effectively using the media as a tool to amplify the voice of civil society, in order to promote social change.

¹ Wallack, L., 1994. Media advocacy: a strategy for empowering people and communities. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 15(4), pp.42

² Jernigan, D.H. and Wright, P.A., 1996. Media advocacy: lessons from community experiences. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 17(3), pp.306

1 SPEAK TO YOUR AUDIENCE – CUT THE JARGON

A key concern for many engaging with the media is whether their audience will be able to understand them and the message they are trying to put across. Successful engagement, therefore, is not only about the topic but also about the audience. In any piece of writing, like an op-ed, people are more likely to understand if you tailor your message to your audience, ensure your language is accessible, and avoid unnecessary jargon.

Similarly, in an interview, you are more likely to keep your listener or audience engaged by ensuring that what you say is accessible and understandable. In her preparation for an interview on a television talk show, Kristal Duncan, Project Lead of Youth Capital, did practice runs with her colleagues but also with family members and people who did not have the same background knowledge about the Youth Capital campaign. This practice helped Duncan to ensure that listeners from a variety of contexts were able to understand the crux of the points she made.

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“What made the difference for me was doing a practice run at home with my mother-in-law. At times she would tell me ‘I don’t understand what you are saying’ – then I tried to explain myself a little bit better and not use so many jargon words. That really prepared me for going into the interview.”

Kristal Duncan, Project Lead of Youth Capital



Kristal Duncan being interviewed on SABC 3's Afternoon Express show in May 2019.

2 HAVE A “GOLDEN THREAD” TO GUIDE YOUR NARRATIVE

In any piece of writing, it is crucial to frame your narrative clearly. The difficulty arising from writing about an issue you are deeply passionate and knowledgeable about, is that you run the risk of overcomplicating it. Sometimes people who write op-eds try to share everything they know, which ultimately leads to readers drowning in information, and taking very little away from the piece. While writing, it is more effective to identify the key takeaway or point you want people to remember after reading your piece. Use that point as a narrative guide to inform your writing piece, like a “golden thread” tying all aspects of your narrative together. After you have found your “golden thread”, discover your angle that brings the topic to life – like putting a metaphor in people’s minds or taking a different approach or lens distinguishing your op-ed from other pieces on the same issue.

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“Ask yourself what is the absolute point you want people to walk away with? And then, what is the angle that brings it to life in a different way? If someone reads a complex op-ed and walks away with just a few more facts but no real sense of what to do with them, that’s probably a missed opportunity.”

Janet Jobson, Deputy CEO of DGMT

Janet Jobson, Deputy CEO of DGMT, further advises that one of the best ways to develop a feel for how to structure arguments to flow logically and to be convincing is to read other people’s op-eds regularly. When you read an op-ed that you find particularly engaging and convincing, ask yourself what made it so.

Interviews also require you to guide your narrative around the central issue you hope to address. Identify the key message you want to get across before the interview and keep this message clear throughout. You know the depth of your work better than the interviewer so it is important that you guide the interview in the direction it needs to go, rather than going in with an expectation that the interviewer will do more of the work for you. How much an interviewer prepares for an interview will vary and, if left to its own devices, an interview can go off on its own direction, taking away from your message.

3 CULTIVATE EMPATHY TO CREATE CONNECTION



“Find what you really connect with on an issue, so you can use that to connect with others.”

Janet Jobson, Deputy CEO of DGMT

An op-ed co-authored by David Harrison, CEO of DGMT, and Shakira Maharaj, Innovation Director at DGMT, around the lead programmes related to education and employment in South Africa began with reference to a Dr Seuss story. Another op-ed written by Kwanda Ndoda, Innovation Manager at DGMT, and Wessel van den Berg of the Sonke Gender Justice Network, about men in Early Childhood Development (ECD) started with a story of van den Berg’s own experience as an ECD provider, followed by the experiences of other male ECD practitioners in caring roles. Sharing anecdotes or telling personal stories like these are a powerful tool in any engagement with the media. They help to humanise an issue and connect you to your audience – they help to make you and what you are writing or speaking about more relatable. And the more relatable something is, the more likely people are to care about – and therefore act on – the issues you are addressing.



“The stories you choose are very important – they need to be stories that don’t create a sense of pity and also not an overly optimistic story [...] I think it is important to frame real people, people who are relatable, so that a greater group can feel drawn to the story and understand it.”

Merle Mansfield, Programme Director for the Zero Dropout Campaign

Statistics also become more effective when they are made personal, especially in interviews. Large numbers and percentages are difficult to conceptualise but other metrics can be used to make numbers come alive for people, and have a strong impact. For example, in her interview on *Afternoon Express*, Duncan, instead of merely stating the large number of people not in education, employment and training (NEET), opted to tell her audience how many times this number of people could fill the FNB stadium. Ratios – like the statistic that almost half of all children entering Grade 1 will not make it to Matric – are also more accessible to people and are more likely to sit powerfully with the person hearing or reading about them.

4 TIME IT RIGHT

The digital age has brought with it a sea of information; this information can either amplify or drown out your message so pick your moment well. For instance, talking about a particular issue can be even more powerful when the media and public are already talking about that issue. The Zero Dropout Campaign, for example, prepared op-eds, press releases and a publication on school dropout several weeks before the release of the 2019 matric results. So, when the results were announced in January 2020, the campaign was ready to tap into the national conversation and use it to shine a light on an issue related to the public's deep concern about education and grades, and the media's interest in new or interesting angles about the results their audiences might not know about. All the buzz about the results gave the campaign far more traction and context than if it had released an op-ed and its publication on school dropout at another time of the year.

The op-ed on men in caregiving roles in the ECD sector was faced with a public moment of an entirely different kind, however. After months of preparation, transcribing interviews and writing, the op-ed was ready to be published at the same time when people in South Africa were outraged by the continued violence perpetrated by men against women in the country. Ndoda and van den Berg were understandably apprehensive about releasing their work in this context, and debated the timing. Ultimately, they decided it was an opportune time to have a conversation about men in caring positions because, rather than negate what was being discussed about violence against women, it provided a piece of hope in what felt like the darkest of times; it offered readers alternative examples of men that other men could look up to.



“It doesn’t help to curse the dark. We need to light the candle.”

Kwanda Ndoda, Innovation Manager at DGMT

5 BE BRAVE

Members of civil society do tremendous work that usually does not make its way into the press. Admittedly, it is difficult for people in civil society to find time to write op-eds and prepare for interviews. Stints in the media, however, are essential to gain traction for campaigns and problematise issues.

For instance, up until a few years ago the concept of school dropout was not talked about often. Issues like dropout happen so consistently that they become normalised. To problematise this issue, the Zero Dropout Campaign began

to develop opinion pieces around dropout a few years ago, in conjunction with a moment where the problem was becoming politicised. Instead of joining the flurry of political pieces, the Zero Dropout Campaign began by issuing a human story about what it is like for a child to go to school in South Africa, and the obstacles children face.

This more relatable angle was then followed by many more technical pieces from others about the dropout rate, creating the language for ordinary South Africans to engage with the concept.

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“I think civil society often does not realise what useful insight it is sitting on. [...] For these organisations to put themselves out there more often is part of how we build a powerful constituency. Be brave.”

Janet Jobson, Deputy CEO of DGMT

ADVICE ON PITCHING TO THE MEDIA

Pitching stories to the media can feel daunting. One of the biggest challenges when trying to get the media’s attention is competing with the volume of content out there – often a piece has to surface through hundreds of emails received by publishers. Typically DGMT follows a specific process in order to bring its media pitches to the forefront. Firstly, the Innovation Manager or Director writes an op-ed. The op-ed undergoes an extensive editing process, initially sense-checked by colleagues, then copy-checked until it is finalised. A media pitch is then written and sent to opinion editors. For important publications press releases are written and DGMT sends a hard copy to various media houses. Since opinion editors receive many emails, media pitches are sent to about three first choice publications based on the appropriateness of the content for the publication’s profile of readers. After about two days – depending on the time-sensitivity of the article – some follow-up is done, and if there is no offer of publication, the pitch is then sent to the next three appropriate publications and so forth.

Once a piece has been published online or in print, a further pitch is sent about the op-ed to radio and TV producers asking for time to talk about the topic on air.

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“Often pieces do not get picked up only because of the volume of work that publications receive. It is important to keep crafting the skill of writing and wait for the moment that your insight will carry the biggest impact.”

Corné Kritzinger,
Communication Specialist at DGMT

Corné Kritzinger, Communications Specialist at DGMT, advises that a media pitch should be short, and illustrate as quickly and convincingly as possible why the piece is relevant or important to share with the public. Be sure to follow-up on the communication you sent with a telephone call and/or an email after a day or so. For those who have never pitched to the media before, he says not to be intimidated by speaking to the media. Ultimately, the press is made up of people who are trying to share stories like yours to the public. For those whose pieces have not yet been picked up, don’t be discouraged. Often pieces do not get picked up only because of the volume of work that publications receive. It is important to keep crafting the skill of writing and wait for the moment that your insight will carry the biggest impact.

CONCLUSION

The media can amplify the advocacy of community organisations. If tapped into more by civil society, it can be used to speak directly to those with influence, put pressure on decision-makers to make positive policy changes and even spark national consciousness around certain issues. After all, the stories coming out of civil society are an important part of our national narrative – they need to be shared and heard.

Brief developed by **Claire McCann**

This is the learning experience of DGMT.



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TIP SHEET³

THINGS TO AVOID IN AN OP-ED

- › Avoid academic jargon or technical terms. When writing, keep your audience in mind. Just because a concept is clear to you does not mean it is clear to others.
- › Be careful not to overuse words.
- › Do not turn your op-ed into a backgrounder. A backgrounder provides background information on an organisation place or product while an op-ed is too short for so much detail.

WRITING A GOOD OP-ED

- › Be concise. Op-eds are brief, around 500-800 words, so arguments must be made concisely.
- › A well-crafted op-ed will spark more interest when it's tied to something that readers are already talking about.
- › Bring a fresh perspective to the table. Published op-eds offer something new to an ongoing conversation – a point that hasn't been argued ad nauseam.
- › Your op-ed should do more than offer an opinion. It must include evidence to back up your argument and must have considered that there's more than one way to think about what you're advocating.
- › Stagger information in each paragraph. Each paragraph must leave a question that leads to the next, or leaves a reader wanting to read more.
- › Do not overuse statistics. In the first five paragraphs use a maximum of two statistics.

WAYS TO BEGIN AND END AN OP-ED

WAYS TO START AN OP-ED:

- › Contradiction: a contradiction has the strongest news value, and need not always be sensational.
- › Link to an event or a newsworthy topic. An event or newsworthy topic is not a special day like 'World Health Day'. A special day is fleeting and does not last long in a news cycle.
- › Use a quote or case study description: this creates a narrative environment from which an op-ed grows.

WAYS TO END AN OP-ED:

- › Leave the reader with a question, something to think about or that causes them to do further research or start a discussion.
- › End with a powerful quote from the case study/referenced work or individual. End with a question or statement after the quote as part of the closing paragraph.

PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW BASED ON YOUR OP-ED

Preparing for an interview is essential as, even though you know your information from writing an op-ed, if you feel unprepared you may become flustered, answer questions badly, and leave the audience doubting your knowledge.

Here are some ways you can prepare:

- › Become familiar with the interviewer and their show by watching/listening to their past shows if possible. This will allow you to pre-empt the style of questions you will be asked.
- › Find out if the interviewer will be using prepared questions and if they are available to view, if they are available, but be wary of preparing exact responses as you might sound scripted or rehearsed.
- › Discuss your op-ed with friends, family and colleagues.
- › Practice answering questions in a mock interview.
- › Bear in mind that some interviewers are more prepared than others – but that if you are prepared in an unorganised interview you can take a leading role in the discussion.

³ We would like to acknowledge Bhekisisa: The Centre for Health Journalism and journalist and radio personality, Chris Gibbons, who ran excellent workshops with our staff in which they shared their wealth of knowledge and experience on writing op-eds and doing radio interviews.