

# Media Activism Advice

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## I. Introduction to the principles of media activism

When we see stories and articles in the media that are inaccurate or biased, our natural response is to be infuriated and develop a hostile attitude to the media. It is very important to realize that directing hostility towards the media or approaching them with anger will NOT bring about positive change. Yes, there is a lot of deliberate distortion and omission, but often bad reporting is the result of media organizations not having access to good information and to alternative viewpoints. This is where YOU can make the difference.

The basic roles an activist can play in the media are:

**Accountability:** acting as a check on inaccurate and unfair reporting and analysis.

**Education:** developing relationships with editors, producers and journalists and becoming a source of accurate news and alternative views.

**Participation:** becoming a voice in the media through getting letters and articles published, and doing interviews. A good activist can aim to do any or all of these and develop skills over time.

## II. Six Steps to Successful Media Activism and Participation

Every person who listens to the radio, watches TV or reads the newspaper can go from being a passive "recipient" of views and images created by others to an active participant fighting for fairer and more accurate coverage of what is happening to Palestinians. Here are six steps based on our experience:

### Step 1: Become an analyst

For every report you hear or read, ask yourself "what is good about this, what is bad? Whose voices are included, whose are excluded. What would it take to make this report better?" Don't make blanket statements that you can't support. If your local paper has ten bad articles on the Middle East and one good one, don't say "all your coverage is bad." Rather, be prepared to praise the good one, and use it as a way to illustrate why more good reporting is needed, and contrast it to the bad ones.

### Step 2: Choose your battles, learn the battlefield

None of us can read or listen to everything, but you can pick one or two sources--radio, tv or newspaper and try to monitor them consistently. That way, you can become familiar with patterns of good or bad reporting over time, and even with the work of individual reporters, and have a much stronger case for your arguments, and a better basis to establish a dialogue with the people who produce the news.

### Step 3: Know your facts

#### Maximise your use of available information on the Internet:

- **Use Lexis-Nexis** -- It is available to most university students and is invaluable. This is a searchable full-text database of hundreds of newspapers, magazines and electronic media transcripts. It is easy to use, and if your university gives you access to it is an invaluable tool. Ask your university library if it is available to you.
- **Use wire services like Reuters, Agence France Presse and the Associated Press** -- these are the basic sources where most local media get their international coverage from. But there are many stories that they choose not to use. It is easy to search through wire stories at: <http://dailynews.yahoo.com>
- **Use the Web** -- There are many alternative sources of information such as human rights organizations operating in the Middle East.
- **Foreign media** -- BBC, European newspapers. Use them to contrast with US coverage. Often they are more complete and impartial.
- **Be accurate, precise and do your research** -- Don't say something is a fact unless you are sure. If you are not sure, check on it. Lexis-Nexis is an extremely valuable tool for fact-checking. You are always much more impressive if you can show you command the facts. Don't give partial facts or distort facts. Speak the truth even on the days when the truth doesn't help the arguments you want to make.
- **Quote people accurately** -- write down what they say. Tape programs. Keep a pen and paper near the radio or TV. Cite your sources. Remember, your credibility is your most valuable asset.

### Step 4: Communicate:

- **Use email. Phone calls as follow up. Letters and faxes are good too.** Unsure how to reach a journalist or editor directly? Call the newspaper/radio/TV station directly and ask. Most media outlets have websites which offer some information about how to contact them.

- **Be courteous and collegial. When communicating with journalists or editors, remember the following:**
- **They are human beings. They feel harried and under pressure.** They hear from a lot of nutcases, and will easily dismiss you as just another nutcase, unless you communicate effectively, professionally and politely.
- **When writing a letter, do not assume that the reader is as familiar with the subject as you are.** Always include relevant information (date, name of reporter, subject), and briefly restate what was in the report that you are commenting on. If you are writing a letter to the editor which you hope will be published, different rules apply: you must be very brief, concise and to the point (see below). If the letter is supposed to educate the journalist, then you can afford to make it longer and include more information.
- **Never give in to frustration or emotions, even when you see a very hurtful or inaccurate report.** Always address people as if they were colleagues. Often they will respect you and answer you, even if they still disagree with you. This will help to establish a dialogue.
- **Journalists are suspicious of "advocates."** To avoid being labelled as an advocate, you should be able to argue factually, and calmly against the opposing viewpoint. You will not be taken seriously unless you can respond thoughtfully to opposing viewpoints. It is even better if you can anticipate and diffuse the opposing arguments. Remember, if the truth is on your side, then you have nothing to be afraid of!
- **Praise the good, as well as damning the bad.** It is hard to overstate the importance of this. Journalists are much more likely to take you seriously if they feel they will get a fair hearing from you. A way to demonstrate this is to take the time to write a short note praising them for a good report. We are all human and we all like praise! Often a note of praise is what opens the door to dialogue.

### Step 5: Become a Source

In our experience, the vast majority of journalists are decent people. They may not be experts on the issue you are interested in, and they rely on the information their sources give them, so you have to become a source, of good, timely reliable information and analysis. It is better to be a source, than just a person with a gripe! Being a source does not mean bombarding someone with 10 lengthy emails every day. Be selective and thoughtful. What are the most important things you think they need to know? Even better, ask them about the kinds of things they are interested in hearing about. Once you establish a record, and some credibility, journalists will begin to turn to you, just to discuss ideas, or even ask for quotes and interviews. Now you have become a "source."

### Step 6: Develop networks

Share your letters with interested friends and fellow activists. This will encourage others to follow your example, and will give you a way to share information. Become a "teacher." Encourage people to write to newspapers both in praise and when they don't agree.

### Meeting with the Editorial Board

Newspapers typically have an editorial board. This is the group of people who decide on what stands a newspaper will take in its unsigned editorials, (known as "staff editorials" in the US and "Leaders" in the UK.) These articles represent the newspaper's position on a given issue. Any group of people can ask for a meeting with the editorial board. It is best to have some sort of title for this. For example if you have three or four people, call yourselves "The Circleville Committee for Middle East Justice" or something like that. Before you ask for such a meeting, DO YOUR RESEARCH. Look through back issues of the newspaper. What reporting and opinion was good? What was bad? What do you want them to know? If a person connected with the conflict comes through town, for example a human rights activist or a witness from Palestine, this is a good occasion to ask for a meeting with the editorial board.

## Electronic Media

### Giving an interview on radio or television

Most people are nervous the first time they go on the radio or on television. With practice it becomes easier and easier. The trick is to know what your message is beforehand and find a way to say it in a concise and accessible way. No matter what questions you are asked, be sure to put your message across. Your goal should be to set the agenda and define the terms of the discussion regardless of the questions you get. Here is an example of how to do this. This sample interview is typical of the type activists have been having:

**Question:** The Israelis say that Yasir Arafat isn't doing enough to stop violence. What more can Yasir Arafat do to put an end to the violence?

**Answer:** The issue is not what Yasir Arafat is doing, but what the Israelis are doing. The Palestinians are living under a very brutal military occupation....[you can then talk about what occupation means to Palestinians.]

**Question:** But we are seeing Palestinians using guns and firing at Israelis. The Israelis say they are just defending themselves.

**Answer:** You cannot defend yourself by occupying someone else's country in violation of international law. This is

aggression, not self-defense. The whole world has condemned Israel's 34-year-old occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It is true that there have been some Palestinians who fired guns, but the vast majority of Palestinians killed and injured had no guns. Israel's excuses just don't hold up.

**Question:** What do you think needs to happen for there to be peace and to stop the violence?

**Answer:** There will be peace when Israeli occupation forces withdraw and Palestinians are allowed to live free in their own country.

And so on...In the above example, the interviewee decided in advance that she wanted to stress the fact that the Palestinians are living under occupation, so that all the events would be considered in that context. Practice makes perfect....

### **Know your audience**

When speaking publicly or in the media, be aware of who your audience is. Sometimes you might be up against a hostile person representing a Zionist viewpoint. Remember, this is not the person you are trying to convince or argue with. You cannot change their mind. Your goal is to appeal to the majority of people in the media audience who are uncommitted and who don't know enough about the true situation to make up their minds. Speaking truthfully and calmly about what is really happening is the goal. Don't allow yourself to be provoked or baited by an interviewer or another interviewee.

## **From FAIR**

### **How to Communicate with Journalists**

There are 101 excuses for not writing or calling the media when you see unfair, biased or inaccurate news coverage: "I don't know enough"; "I'm too busy"; "My computer crashed."

Communicating with journalists makes a difference. It does not have to be perfect; not all letters to journalists need to be for publication. Even a one-sentence, handwritten note to a reporter can be helpful. If you take the time to type a substantive letter, send copies of it to two or three places within the media outlet-perhaps to the reporter, his or her editor, as well as to the letters-to-the-editor department.

If media outlets get letters from a dozen people raising the same issue, they will most likely publish one or two of them. So even if your letter doesn't get into print, it may help another one with a similar point of view get published. Surveys of newspaper readers show that the letters page is among the most closely read parts of the paper. It's also the page policy-makers look to as a barometer of public opinion.

When you write to journalists, be factual, not rhetorical. Do not personally attack them; that's more likely to convince them that they're in the right. Address them in the language that most journalists are trained to understand: Call on them to be responsible, professional, balanced and inclusive of diverse sources and viewpoints.

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### **How to Meet With News Management**

If the coverage you object to is part of an overall pattern of bias, you might want to go beyond communicating with individual journalists. The next step is often an attempt to set up a meeting with management at the news outlet.

#### **Gather evidence of bias**

Clip offending newspaper articles. Jot down inaccurate, misleading or offensive comments in television news coverage. Record the political perspectives presented on talkshows. (See "How to Detect Bias in News Media" above.)

#### **Document the pattern of bias**

Be prepared to explain how this is bad journalism (gives people an inaccurate or misleading impression of the issue or community, does not provide a balanced range of sources, etc.). Accuracy is of the utmost importance here.

#### **Build a coalition**

Pull together several people who represent various constituencies in your community, heads of various organizations or coalitions who can speak for the broadest possible constituency. You might want to let media representatives know how many people you represent. Media outlets are businesses; the number of media consumers you represent is part of your power. Whether you are requesting that a station air a particular program to provide balance, or demanding that a newspaper use more neutral terminology, the key is demonstrating community support for your position.

#### **Set up the meeting**

Write your local media outlet and ask for a meeting. If your complaint is about news, explain that you represent a broad constituency of people concerned with the issue and would like to meet with the editor/producer/news director. If you want a newspaper to take a particular editorial stand on an issue, contact the editorial board. A week or so later, follow up the letter with a phone call. Keep calling until you get through. Usually someone will meet with you.

### **Plan your presentation**

You will probably want to meet or strategize ahead of time to go over who will say what, what not to say, what statistics or documentation you would like to provide, who will provide them, etc. First impressions are key. What do you want to communicate in the first minute?

### **Present your case**

Be clear about what your goals are before you go into the meeting. Be polite but firm. Be persistent but do not lose your temper. Stick to what you can prove. Conclude your meeting with specific requests for improvements in coverage, the inclusion of views that are being excluded to provide balance, providing context or history on a specific issue, terminology changes, etc.

### **Follow-up**

Send a letter outlining agreements reached to everyone who attended the meeting. If you see good coverage that might be a response to your concerns, promptly contact the highest level media representative present at the meeting and acknowledge the effort to respond to your concerns. If you see continued poor coverage, write or call to object. Unless you make it clear you are monitoring coverage on an ongoing basis, you will not be unlikely to influence news media.