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Promoting Social Justice in Partnership with the Mass Media

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Research on mass communications suggests that public understanding of social justice issues can be significantly enhanced by the appropriate use of the media. Indeed, without the access to the public that only the mass media can provide, social workers are unlikely to have much impact in the public’s understanding of critical social justice issues and appropriate responses to these issues. Based on emerging research and practice, we identify opportunities for individuals, groups and organizations interested in addressing issues of social justice to engage in productive public communication activities through newspapers, radio and television.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s mass society, national debate about important social justice and civil rights issues occurs primarily in the mass media. This debate tends to be skewed by such factors as the multinational corporate ownership of the major media outlets, a questionable objectivity on the part of both print and broadcast journalism and a shift in the center of gravity of public discourse far to the right of center during the last decade or so (Bennett, 1992; Harwood, 1992; Patterson, 1994; Alterman, 1992; Parenti, 1992). Therefore, it is important that persons interested in promoting more accurate media depictions of issues such as crime, poverty,
drug abuse, mental illness and inequality, expand their public communication activities through the mass media to generate more informed public debate about and more appropriate community responses to these issues.

This paper describes media activities in the public health and human services fields, includes data and principles flowing from general communication, diffusion of innovations and social construction theories, and from social marketing and media advocacy. Established principles for developing productive partnerships with print and broadcast journalists and concrete examples of ways in which scholars and practitioners can add mass media communications to their professional repertoire are provided.

PROBLEMATIC PORTRAYAL OF CRIME AND DRUGS, INEQUALITY AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Our understanding and attitudes towards people, events, and social issues are greatly affected by the information and views communicated through the media (Altheide and Snow, 1991). The media play a central role in the shaping of the political scene, in public agenda setting, and in identifying how issues will be debated (Lichter, 1988; Molotch, Protess, and Gordon, 1987). Advocates for social justice need to become more medi-literate and active participants in these public agenda setting, opinion making, and policy formulation processes. Indeed, we will argue that justice is unlikely to be well served if prevailing media depictions of crime and criminal justice, the rights of the mentally ill, minority groups and the poor are left unchallenged.

Crime has been an enduring preoccupation of the American media from at least the first half of the 19th century, "... when the urban penny press employed violence, sex and scandal to build dizzying new levels of circulation and began the modern age of mass media" (LaMay & Dennis, 1995:1).

Unfortunately, the overwhelming message the public gets from the media is: "Beware! Time to buy that Uzi and barricade yourself" (Rosenberg, 1995, p. 103). Sexual assaults, homicides, muggings and similar frightening events are depicted as if they were usual occurrences. This is not just the case in films and television entertainment programs. Similar criticism can be leveled at
television news. "Step off a plane anywhere in the United States, tune in to the local TV news programs and you’re likely to see a succession of reports on murders, shootouts, rapes, traffic wrecks, fires and other grisly events," (Cohen & Solomon, 1993:A5). The situation is no better in the supposedly more credible national network news programs where the coverage of murders has soared (Kurtz, 1997), while the national crime rate, including the rate for murder and other violent crime, has been declining for years ("Murder Rate Lowest Since '69," 1997).

The media take the rare criminal incident and turn it into a common image, heightening public fear and expectation of crime. Furthermore, media depictions of crime attribute its causes to the individual criminal and support repressive social arrangements and approaches to fighting crime. The media and its consumers resist alternative explanations of the causes of crime. "Depictions of predatory criminals both entertain and comfort us - entertain because they scare us, and comfort because they relieve our social conscience by showing crime as clearly not due to social inequities, racism, or poverty - things society could be held responsible for and might address" (Surette, 1992, p. 250). With the public convinced from the media messages and images that most inner-city citizens are involved in violent crime, aggressive law enforcement policies are justified while investments in health, educational and social services to the inner city are unlikely to be supported. While there is no evidence that harsh crime control measures have increased public safety, they have greatly increased the numbers of young minority males in criminal justice system custody, "thereby fundamentally undermining social policies aimed at fuller integration of disadvantaged people into the fabric of American life" (Tonry, 1995, p. vii).

Media coverage of the ongoing "drug crisis" is also problematic. The network television news shows and the major print media carry running stories on various aspects of the crisis. This intensive and sustained media coverage and repeated calls for a "war on drugs" are not a consequence of any increase in drug use since all available evidence indicates this has not changed. News values that emphasize conflict, drama, scandal and danger almost certainly are at work (Alger, 1989; Johnson, 1989; Reeves and Campbell, 1994; Reinarman & Levine, 1989; Orcutt & Turner,
Orcutt & Turner (1993) present an interesting and plausible case that the 1986 "drug epidemic" was actually what they have characterized as a "media epidemic" produced by media distortion of drug use data in order to create a more dramatic story.

Wozencraft (1995) points out that white middle class Americans consume 70 to 80 percent of the illicit drugs used in the country but 47 percent of the time evening news programs show black people involved with drugs. She would undoubtedly concur with Tonry's (1995) assertion that the "war on drugs and the harsh set of crime control policies in which it was enmeshed were undertaken to achieve political, not policy, objectives" (p. 39).

Harwood (1992) considers the most critical issues permanently absent from media consideration are the "endemic pathology" of racism and "the underlying reality of class divisions in America and the destructive myth of a classless society" (p. 28). He attributes these "blind spots" to the fact that "journalists are attuned to both the newspaper audience and the political class which are drawn, more than even before in this century, from the middle and upper ranks of society" (p. 28). For example, as is the case with the poor and the working class in general, organized labor does not fare well in the media. Indeed, "for most of its history the American labor movement has taken adverse media coverage for granted" (Puette, 1992:3). The generally unfavorable treatment of unions and the issues they seek to address has further deteriorated over the last two decades from an overall pro-business posture couched in quasi-neutral reporting to overt union-bashing (Winkler, 1997).

A decade of research on public discourse in the British and Dutch press by VanDijk and his associates at the University of Amsterdam has led them to conclude that, as is the case in North America (Campbell, 1995; Bozell and Baker, 1990), the media reinforce a subtle but powerful form of institutional racism in those countries. While couched in the rhetoric of civility and tolerance this "elite racism" is exercised by those "... who initiate, monitor and control the majority and most influential forms of institutional and public talk and text" (VanDijk, 1995, p. 4).

Despite the prevailing self-assessment of the media as objective and balanced in the presentation of ethnic news and opinion,
many factors suggest otherwise. Ethnic minority groups have little access to the media and little influence over how they and the issues that are important to them are portrayed. As a result of their control of the media, whites tend to be depicted as non-biased and tolerant or at least neutral. Ethnic minorities are generally portrayed in terms of the problems or threats they create or represent while the same is not true for whites. Indeed it is not unusual for accusations of racism to be seen as more problematic than racism itself (VanDijk, 1995:101).

In American television, both African Americans and Hispanics have been virtually invisible in mainstream programming and, when they have appeared, they have overwhelmingly been portrayed in criminal or other negative roles (Bozell and Baker, 1990; Campbell, 1995; Braxton, 1996; Espinosa, 1997). A recent study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (1996) reported some welcome progress from an earlier 1992 study that indicated that Hispanics "... were low in number, low in social status, and lowdown in personal character, frequently portraying violent criminals." They noted that the most egregious offenders were the so-called "reality" programs, "... whose version of reality often consisted of white cops chasing black and Hispanic robbers" (p. i). While there were more positive portrayals in the 1994–95 television season, Hispanics were still more likely to be invisible (two percent of television characters although they constitute ten percent of the American population) and were still more likely to be portrayed in criminal roles.

Depictions of mental illness are common in all forms of media (Wahl, 1995:3). Unfortunately, the way mental illness is portrayed in the media is problematic, with serious consequences for the rights of persons with mental illnesses (Backer, 1984; Domino, 1983; Wahl and Leikowitz, 1989; Wahl and Roth, 1982). As found in numerous studies of prime time TV, (Signiorelli, 1989; Gerbner, 1985), depictions of mentally ill serial characters reinforce the inherent 'evilness' the public associates with mentally ill people by connecting mental illness inevitably to criminal behavior.

In addition to the problematic portrayals in the broadcast media, the majority of newspaper stories of mental illness in North America associate psychiatric illness with violence, crime, danger, and unpredictability (Shain & Phillips, 1991; Day & Page,
Furthermore, most media depictions imply that persons with mental illnesses are not amenable to treatment and that the main hope for protecting the public is their removal, through confinement or more drastic solutions. It would be disingenuous to suggest that the mass media are totally or even primarily responsible for the stigma and discrimination experienced by people who are mentally ill. However, there is abundant evidence to suggest that negative media images reinforce and perpetuate long-standing negative and inaccurate public beliefs about mental illness and persons who are or have been mentally ill. The cost to those who suffer those illnesses and to the public in general cannot be overestimated.

THE PUBLIC SERVICE POTENTIAL OF THE MASS MEDIA

The preceding discussion of the problems created for certain groups in society and for informed public consideration of social policy issues by inaccurate media images can lead to serious doubts about the potential of working effectively with the media. Broadcasting and newspaper publishing are business enterprises and, it has been argued, must inevitably place corporate interest before the public interest (Alterman, 1992; Harwood, 1992; Parenti, 1992). As a consequence, images and messages that will attract audiences and readers for advertisers, thereby generating profits, and that will legitimize existing social, economic and political arrangements will predominate. Messages or images that threaten these goals will be ignored, trivialized or muted.

Despite these real limitations, the mass media provide many opportunities for the communication of messages that can make valuable contributions to social policy goals and these opportunities should not be overlooked. For example, the media generally espouse a commitment to public service and, indeed, this is a legal requirement of broadcasters when they receive their licenses to use the public airwaves. While government regulation of the American broadcast industry has been weak for a decade or so, there are some preliminary signs that the tide of deregulation has turned (see, for example, the Cable Act of 1992). Besides, most broadcasters have found that an avowed and demonstrable commitment to the communities they serve is simply good business practice. Newspaper publishers and editors “generally feel a
sense of responsibility to fill a public service role, to participate in
the affairs of the community as good citizens . . . (They) are opin-
ion leaders and take their responsibility as agenda setters very
seriously" (Wallack, 1990a: 154). Many national and local media
outlets have taken up issues such as homelessness, drunken driv-
ing, domestic violence and the like and have given these issues
sustained and well-informed treatment. Phoenix newspapers' 
multi-year campaign, "Saving Arizona's Children," addresses the
complex issues facing Arizona's families, children, schools, child
welfare authorities, and juvenile courts is only one such example
of responsible, sustained, informed and influential media cover-
age of important social issues (Whitney, 1993).

Finally, the media have recently been under increasing inter-
nal and external pressure to review their standards and practices
and to be more responsible in reporting and analyzing impor-
tant issues and events (Patterson, 1994; Ivins, 1993; Shaw, 1996;
that during the Watergate era in the mid-1970s, the investigative
reporting of the American mass media earned them high respect
and approval ratings from the public. However, within a decade,
the public's respect had plummeted, as a result of perceptions of
arrogance, sensational coverage of people and events, disregard
for privacy issues, and other abuses. In a widely cited article on
"Why Americans Hate the Media," Fallows (1996b) notes:

"... a contrast between the apparent self-satisfaction of the media
celebrities and the contempt in which they are held by the public.
The news media has a generally positive view of itself in the
watchdog role,' wrote the authors of an exhaustive survey of public
attitudes and the attitudes of journalists themselves towards the
press. (The survey was conducted by the Times Mirror Center for the
People and the Press, and was released last May). 'But the outside
world strongly faults the news media for its negativism. . . . The
public goes so far as to say that the press gets in the way of society
solving its problems . . .' According to the survey, 'two out of three
members of the public had nothing or nothing good to say about
the media.' " (Fallows, 1996b, p. 64).

These findings are mirrored in a concurrent TIME/CNN sur-
vey which revealed broad public antipathy towards the news
media, with 75 percent of those surveyed categorizing the media
as "sensationalistic"; 63 percent describing them as "too negative"; and 73 percent expressing doubt about the accuracy if the news they were receiving (Zoglin, 1996, p. 63). Two decades after Watergate, the America media are yet to recover the respect of the public, resulting in vigorous calls for reform: ". . . America needs a press that is free and responsible. For an institution that demands so much of others, the press has become remarkably derelict in the discharge of its public duty" (Patterson, 1994, p. 250).

These developments can provide new opportunities for productive relationships between journalism and persons interested in social justice. By including the latter among their sources of information, journalists can increase their understanding and improve their coverage of social issues, and enhance their credibility with the public, public interest groups, regulatory bodies, and policy makers. In more instances than not, those of us who initiate media activities with an informed but open mind, encounter cooperative and professional print and broadcast journalists who can become valuable allies in our efforts to communicate important messages to the public. Given the media-infused society that we live in today, we really do not have any choice about whether or not to deal with the media. The media are too important to ignore or avoid. Where we find they are failing to serve the public interest, we need to take steps to hold them to appropriate standards.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When planning to initiate public information efforts through the mass media, it is possible to look to the findings of research in mass communications. Theoretical principles and practices can be identified to guide your activities and increase the probability that your efforts will be productive. The basic theoretical architecture (with practical applications) will be reviewed briefly in order to give a sense of what it looks like.

The bulk of public information efforts through the media represent specialized applications of communication theory (McGuire, 1989; Macdonald, 1992). Theoretical principles from other fields (marketing, economics, social psychology, sociology, and others) are also used to design public communication campaigns.
that are effective in persuading people to modify their beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors. For example, when seeking ways to maximize the effectiveness of specific media messages, consideration of factors such as the message source, nature of message, the target audience, and appropriate channel selection is likely to be helpful.

Public information activities through the media usually involve efforts to persuade people to accept and act upon new information and ideas. A subset of principles from communication theory, namely "diffusion of innovations," or "technology transfer" is relevant to this purpose. Rogers (1983), one of the early proponents of diffusion theory, has shown that new knowledge, information or ideas can be effectively communicated to potential users through a variety of channels. He regards the mass media as particularly useful for introducing new information to specific audiences or influencing the beliefs and attitudes of persons predisposed to accepting new ideas. An innovation, as the term is used in this context, need not be a completely new idea or product, but one which is new to members of a particular target group and the adoption of which would involve new beliefs or behaviors on their part. One example for our purposes would be the communication of accurate information intended to bring about changes in the target audiences' beliefs about their risk of being a victim of violent crime. In letters to newspaper editors, in guest editorials, on radio and television talk shows, and as expert sources to print and broadcast journalists, social workers and other advocates are taking the opportunity to provide accurate information (often new to viewing, listening, and reading audiences) about the average citizen's actual risk of being a crime victim, who the real victims are, and how to take sensible precautions against victimization.

Another useful theoretical model is "social marketing" (Manoff, 1985) which is an adaptation of the theory and practice of marketing in the commercial world and involves processes "in which marketing techniques and concepts are applied to social issues and causes instead of products and services" (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 153). This approach, following marketing practices in the business world, identifies the consumer (or target audience) as the focus of the communication process (Manoff, 1985; Lefebvre,
It draws upon communication and exchange theory and, in planning specific public communication activities, pays particular attention to such factors as *product* (information or messages intended to influence knowledge, beliefs, attitudes or behavior), *price* (what the message recipient is willing to give up in exchange for new beliefs or behavior), *place* (the channel(s) used to reach the target audience), and *promotion* (how best to reach the audience with the intended message). Other important components of mass communication efforts based on social marketing theory include audience segmentation and the use of formative research.

Clarity about the target audience(s) to be reached and careful study of audience characteristics and how best to reach and influence them “allows for a systematic approach to market coverage, rather than relying on a ‘shot-gun’ approach to mass marketing in which many groups, often those most in need of the message, are missed” (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 159). This focus on audience characteristics and the corresponding effort to plan social and health communications that are sensitive to target audience needs, desires and values rather than simply looking for ways to communicate a particular message through the mass media is characteristic of the social marketing model. Such an approach would involve addressing the specific concerns about personal safety of older persons, for example, when communicating information about criminal justice issues.

Especially important for individuals or organizations seeking to bring information about social issues to the attention of the media, the public and policy-makers is “social construction” theory. According to this model, “… people use knowledge they obtain from the media to construct a picture of the world, an image of reality on which they then base their actions” (Surette, 1992:2). As Best (1989) has noted, our sense of what is or is not a social problem, has been produced or constructed through social activities and “… No condition is a social problem until someone considers it a social problem” (Best, 1989:xvii). A wide variety of people (social activists, politicians, journalists) or “claims-makers,” are not only engaged in the process of alerting the public and policy-makers to a situation that deserves public attention but are also offering their own definition or “typification” of the problem and
explicitly or implicitly suggesting how it should be addressed. For instance, the problem of teenage pregnancy can be defined as a consequence of poor family values, family breakdown, inadequate sex education, lack of access to contraceptive services, delayed marriage, and any number of other causes, each with its corresponding set of policy implications. Much of the debate about these issues occurs in the media (Cook et al, 1983; Molotch, Protess & Gordon, 1987).

There is substantial empirical research to support social construction theory (Reinarman and Levine, 1989; Best, 1989; Altheide and Snow, 1991) and its derivatives in relation to mass media effects. For example, Albert (1989) notes that “the public’s contact with AIDS was largely through media images, and those images served to inform the way the problem was conceived and acted upon” (p. 52). Likewise, Rossi (1993) cites the role of the media in heightening public awareness, correcting misconceptions, and prompting action on homelessness. Nelson (1984) documents the indispensable contribution of the media to “making an issue of child abuse” (p. 71). These and numerous other examples of social constructionist research on the problem-definition and agenda setting functions of the media not only provide support for expanded use of the mass media in the human services but also generate “guidelines for what works (and what does not), and under what circumstances” (Best, 1989, p. 249).

A new theoretical explanation which seeks to apply problem-definition and agenda-setting to the area of health promotion, is what has been called “media advocacy” (Wallack, 1990a). This model shifts the emphasis of mass-mediated messages away from the dominant model that places almost total responsibility for improved health and social functioning on the individual and recognizes the environmental factors involved in many health and social issues. Without diminishing individual responsibility, it uses the mass media to highlight social-environmental problems such as poor access to quality health care, education, jobs, adequate housing, transportation, etc., and brings them into the public policy arena. Media messages promoting the development of more adequate educational, employment, social and recreational opportunities for inner-city youth would be examples
of media advocacy efforts addressed to the problem of juvenile delinquency. The efforts of Jay Bilchik, a U.S. Justice Department official, to educate the public through the media about research-supported intervention strategies that reduce juvenile delinquency clearly reflect this approach (Bilchik, 1997, p. B7).

“In their efforts to routinize the creation of news, news agencies come to rely on standing social institutions from government and business as sources of news. The news media favor these institutions because their personnel can be cited as credible official sources and they represent an easy means of getting news. From this reliance, a cyclic pattern develops. The media and these institutions develop a working relationship, each fulfilling organizational needs of the other . . .” (Surette, 1992, p. 59).

Human service professionals and organizations are, therefore, in an excellent position to communicate important messages to the public while helping the media fulfill their public service responsibilities to the communities in which they are located.

The above brief review can scarcely do justice to the large and growing body of research literature on the results of public information efforts through the media. This literature is now yielding useful compilations of principles and guidelines for persons who wish to undertake such activities (see, for example, Atkin and Wallack, 1990; Backer, Rogers and Sopory, 1992). In addition, a range of publications produced by advocacy groups, media organizations, and individuals offer guidance on how to work effectively with the print and broadcast media (see for example, Weiss, 1987; Duncan Rivlin and Williams, 1990; Brawley, 1995).

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

In most communities, there are valuable sources of help in identifying and working with the local media. These include the local Chamber of Commerce, United Way, League of Women Voters, Urban League, and the like, many of which maintain directories that provide useful information about the personnel, practices and requirements of local newspapers and broadcast stations. Some of these organizations also sponsor workshops for non-profit groups and organizations that want to develop greater access to the local media. Another approach is to ask other
local organizations or professionals who have more experience or success in getting into print or on the air. The public relations departments of local corporations are also potential sources of help. Many maintain their own media directories and would be willing to share these with you. However, "the best and most accurate media list is one you build and frequently update yourself" (Duncan, Rivlin and Williams, 1990, p. 4).

This type of local media research is excellent preparation for face-to-face meetings with newspaper editors, and reporters, and radio and TV station personnel in which you describe your organization and issues and seek information about how best to work effectively with a particular media outlet to ensure regular and accurate coverage. Personal contact of this kind is critical to success in working with both print and broadcast media personnel.

If press or broadcast journalists can be helped to understand the significance of the problems you are attempting to address and your purposes in seeking their help in reaching a particular audience or the community in general, and if you actively and genuinely seek to enlist their collaboration (including their suggestions for the best approaches to the task) in what is essentially a public information function, you are likely to develop a mutually rewarding professional relationship and, gain the media access that you need.

"Every day, even the smallest daily newspaper receives hundreds of stories from around the world via various wire services and has room for only a fraction of them. There is, however, a shortage of good (and 'good' means appealing) local stories—stories about local people, events, or issues that interest readers. The shortage stems partly from overburdened local reporting staffs, but also because advocates don't try to 'sell' their issues hard enough by making clear their broad appeal" (Duncan, Rivlin and Lancaster, 1990, p. 8).

The people you will be working with, in newspapers and at broadcast stations are likely to be operating under considerable pressure. Frequently understaffed, overworked and constantly struggling to meet deadlines, they seldom have the time to seek out stories on human service issues. However, this does not mean that these "channel gatekeepers"—to use a social marketing term—are unwilling to cover these stories and this is where you
can help. By alerting print and broadcast journalists to current interesting social issues or stories and providing detailed, accurate information and access to other reliable sources, you can be a valuable resource to your media contacts and achieve greater coverage for your cause or activities. For example:

"Hundreds of hours of free time on television and radio public affairs programs and cable systems can be used to educate the public, raise money, alter attitudes and make a name for an organization. The key to successfully pitching a story to a talk show producer or guest coordinator is to mix timeliness with consumer interest" (Weiss, 1987, p. 39).

Journalists, like human service professionals, are always pressed for time and depend heavily on reliable and well-informed sources for ideas and for information to complete their assignments. If the human service professional can become an established or trusted source for a journalist, a great deal of valuable media access will eventually occur without inordinate effort in your part.

While it is very useful to have established relationships with press and broadcast personnel, occasions will arise when it is appropriate to telephone print or broadcast journalists or editors who do not know you in order to correct an inaccurate or biased story or news report. If you present your statement in a helpful rather than hostile manner, in the interests of accuracy or balance rather than out of contentiousness or pique, you will make no enemies in the average newspaper, television or radio newsroom. You may not get a retraction or correction in all cases, but minimally you can expect that subsequent coverage of your organization or of the same topic will be more accurate or will take your views into account. As a result of your contacts with the newsroom, an editor or station manager may decide that there are important aspects of a topic or issue that warrant more detailed coverage and assign a reporter to prepare a news story or feature article.

In some instances, an editor may offer to publish your statement as a letter to the editor. If you are clearly knowledgeable about the topic or issue in question, you may even establish yourself as a regular fact or opinion source to be contacted on
future occasions as a particular story develops or similar stories emerge.

While few can be expected to possess the skills of professional journalists, there are certainly many social workers and other advocates who have the skills necessary to write for their local newspaper or community magazine. Given some basic competence in written expression, you need only adapt your writing to the style and length requirements of the publication you have in mind. If you can produce a letter to the editor, news release, or article that is well written, if it is on a topic of community interest, and if the paper or magazine thinks you are qualified to address this topic, you have a reasonable chance of having it published. In the case of letters or articles for the paper’s opinion page(s), you have a chance to express a particular point of view or advocate a specific course of action; in other words, engage in claims-making or other social construction activities. Indeed, you are expected to do so.

Human service organizations and professionals also need to consider the use of radio and television in their advocacy efforts. The broadcast media are not only the most pervasive and most powerful media of mass communication in the United States, with enormous impact on individuals, families and communities, but they are more accessible to local committed and resourceful individuals and groups than most realize. For example, any non-profit organization that is committed to the improvement of the community in such fields as health, welfare, education and community service is entitled to have its public service announcements considered for airing by radio and television stations. Even during the deregulatory 1980s when broadcasters were under less pressure from the FCC to meet their public service obligations, most continued to provide free spots to non-profit organizations. They did this because they “found that public service is good for business” and, besides, it “fills in the gaps of commercial minutes not sold to advertisers” (Haese, 1987, p. 36).

News releases that are prepared for the print media can, of course, also be sent to broadcast newsrooms and the personal contacts that work well with newspaper editors and journalists are equally important and effective in developing effective
access to and cooperative relationships with television and radio professionals.

Radio and television "talk-shows" that address a broad range of social issues have mushroomed during the past decade and, especially at the local and regional levels, have a voracious appetite for informed and articulate guests who can effectively address current issues of public interest. The growth and impact have been so striking that *Newsweek* made it a cover story (Fineman, 1993) and other major media outlets followed suit with their own commentaries on or analyses of this phenomenon. The decidedly conservative bias of many of the most popular talk shows and the demagogic tone of some are matters of serious concern and debate among media professionals but, nevertheless, there is ample opportunity for helping professionals to participate in public discussion of serious issues, and to communicate important messages on the air.

Competing for guest spots on radio talk shows in particular is a lot less difficult than the public or, indeed, most helping professionals believe.

"In reality, most radio talk show schedules have huge holes in them. Guests cancel all the time and hosts and producers are generally frantic at least once a week. But they don't want you or the public to know that. They would like the public to believe guests are clamoring to get on the air. They also want to believe they, the hosts and producers, select only the most thought-provoking and timely guests" (Feurey, 1987, p. 33).

The challenge facing the human service organization is to be familiar enough with local radio stations, their formats, their talk shows, and their producers and hosts to capitalize on the opportunities available.

Sanders and Gallagher (1985) have suggested that their colleagues in the social sciences would increase the effectiveness of their media activities if they capitalized on their optimum position in the media marketplace (p. 213). By this, they mean that people in the social and behavioral science fields would be more effective if they grasped and capitalized on their potential for playing a significant role in the "soft news" rather than "hard news" segments of the mass media. That is, they have a valuable
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contribution to make to coverage of human interest, family, child-rearing, aging and similar "complexes of interest" (Gans, 1980), while they are less likely to be able to meet the "newsworthiness" test of hard news stories about electoral politics, violent crime, accidents, disasters, wars and the like.

Among the additional factors that make the area of soft news a propitious area for human service professionals is the fact that journalists who cover "soft news" beats such as health, mental health, family issues and the like, are specialists rather than general assignment reporters. They are less constrained by the daily deadlines that "hard news" journalists face and, therefore, able to devote more time to understanding the complexities of human service issues. Consequently, it is often possible for human service professionals to develop long-term relationships with them that can be conducive to continuing positive coverage (Sanders and Gallagher, 1985, p. 213).

Encouraged by the evidence of what can be achieved or simply in response to pressing needs, increasing numbers of professionals are beginning to recognize and exploit the possibilities that exist in most communities to work with the media to address issues of civil rights and social justice (Brawley, 1995). By building individual and organizational alliances and partnerships with journalists, editors and television directors or producers, a wide range of professional groups and individual academics and practitioners are beginning to take these opportunities. A few specific examples will be described here.

The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) provides guidelines to media professionals who are preparing materials on mental illness, as do other mental health associations, among them those of Northern Virginia and Northern California (Wahl, 1995:138-152). NAMI and some of its state charters also operate "Stigma Clearinghouse" or "Media Watch" groups that stand ready to identify and respond to inaccurate and unfair portrayals of mental illness (pp. 144-151).

In response to strong membership support for expanded public information activities designed to interpret social workers, their work, their clients, and important social issues to the public, the National Association of Social Workers has initiated a number of media communication projects. These have included
the production and distribution of a series of news releases and television and radio public service spots providing important information about homelessness, AIDS, child welfare, aging, and mental health (Dworak-Peck and Battle, 1988; 1989). A large number of social workers have been recruited as volunteers to serve as a permanent resource panel, whose members can be contacted by media representatives on a wide range of social issues. In addition, an advisory committee comprised of television, film and entertainment industry executives and other professionals has been formed to help NASW open up communication channels with major segments of the entertainment media so that social workers, their clients, and important social issues will be accurately depicted ("NCN Project is Building Relationship with Media", 1989).

The work of national organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is also noteworthy. The CDF has earned enormous respect among policy-makers for its stance on issues affecting the welfare of children and it has made effective use of the media in advancing public understanding of the plight of America's children and making the case for progressive family and child welfare policies. It has produced a handbook for use by other children's advocates who wish to communicate with the public through the mass media (Duncan, Rivlin and Williams, 1990).

Individual helping professionals and academics also write regularly for the print media. The following are a few unsystematically collected examples. John Rosemond, a family therapist in private practice in North Carolina, writes a weekly column with the title, "Family Matters" in which he not only gives useful perspectives on parenting and family relationships, but also addresses policy issues that fall within his area of professional competence (Rosemond, 1992, p. E8). Diane Jacobs, a doctoral student in social work at Arizona State University, writes a regular column on a wide range of social issues and civil rights matters (Jacobs, 1997) and recently received an award from the Arizona Press Women's Association for her exemplary efforts (Levy, 1998). Christopher Johns, a Phoenix public defender, writes a bi-weekly
column on criminal justice issues in which he attempts to pro-
vide accurate information about adult and juvenile crime, the
workings of the justice system, and the societal context of crime
and delinquency (Johns, 1996; 1997). Others serve as regular ex-
pert sources for journalists preparing stories on specific social
issues (as the authors of this paper do), send letters to editors,
or write occasional opinion pieces for local, regional, or national
newspapers or magazines. Jill Bertelli, a medical social worker, re-
cently wrote a passionate editorial article for a major metropolitan
newspaper, pointing out the human, social, and financial costs of
allowing mental health, gerontological and child welfare cases to
Similarly, Edward Ryle, a social worker and lobbyist for the local
catholic diocese, frequently voices his views on policies affecting
Arizona’s most vulnerable populations in the editorial pages of
the same newspaper (Ryle, 1994, pp. C1, C3).

Other helping professionals and academics are taking their
message to the airways through appearances on radio and tele-
vision public affairs programs (the authors of this paper do this
with some frequency), or, like social workers Steve Gorin and
Karen Herrick, host their own programs (“Social Workers In the
Public Eye,” 1997; 1998). Adele Baydin, a member of the board of
the Arizona Civil Liberties Union, produces and hosts a weekly
television program called “Your Constitutional Rights” that is
aired on public access channels in Tucson, Arizona. It was recently
ominated for an award for cable broadcast excellence (AzCLU
of Cable TV, 1996).

Each of the above persons is providing what Gandy (1982)
has termed “information subsidies” to the media. These are the
public information materials and products that individuals and
organizations supply to the media that are designed to influence
the agenda-setting function of the media. They are called infor-
mation subsidies because they reduce the cost of the information
for the media by saving them the time, effort, and cost of going
out and finding this information for themselves. In essence, public
information activities of this type are capitalizing on the business
orientation of the media rather than seeing it as a barrier to their
efforts to reach the public through the media.
SUMMARY

There are clearly many opportunities for individuals, groups and organizations interested in addressing issues of civil rights and social justice to engage in productive public communication activities through newspapers, radio and television. Principles derived from diffusion of innovations, social marketing, media advocacy, or social construction theory can aid professionals and academics in understanding what is required. While it is true that not all of us can be involved in media communication efforts, it is equally certain that “some should and (that) all should support attempts at responsible, accurate, balanced dissemination of information” (McCall, Gregory and Lonnborg, 1985:207). It is our contention that public understanding of social justice issues can be significantly enhanced by the appropriate use of the media. Indeed, without the access to the public that only the mass media can provide, we are unlikely to have much impact on the public’s understanding of critical social justice civil rights issues and appropriate responses to these issues.

The prospect of attempting to counter the inaccurate, incomplete and misleading information on crime, poverty, urban decay, mental illness, minority affairs and other matters affecting civil liberties, social justice and public policy may seem daunting to the individual professional or academic, in light of the predominant values and practices of the mass media. While the impact of individual efforts might quite limited, if numbers of concerned individuals, professional bodies and other organizations understood and participated in the type media activities we have described, the cumulative effect would be quite significant.

REFERENCES

“AzCLU on Cable TV.” (1996) Civil Liberties in Arizona. 23(4), Spring, p. 4.


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