

Democracy Hubs

So you're frustrated by politics and you want to do something?

Here's how...

A step-by-step guide to making a difference in five parts



Part 4 – Using the news media

Focus

Forget any preconceptions of journalists and the news media generally that you may have. They're going to love you. Media, especially local media, thrives on dispute and controversy in their own backyard. The last thing they want is for the local council to get an easy ride. It's nothing to do with

politics, and everything to do with good racy news to keep their readers agog. But there are a few basic rules.

Be relevant

Local papers are often very parochial. This is the geographical area they cover – roughly corresponding with their circulation area – and no further. So if your grouse is happening in Bedfordshire then it's absolutely no use talking to local newspapers in Hertfordshire (supposing you can find any).

Have a dog in the fight

I'm afraid nobody cares what you think. You aren't the news, unless you have a role in the narrative like running naked down the high street shouting abuse about your opponents or you're already a 'celebrity'. So you need a dog in the fight, a legitimate reason why your views should count and be reported. If you want to bang on about cutting down woods and you're not a 'stakeholder', nobody will listen.

So in this case you need to use triangulation: you go to somebody who does have a dog in the fight and you ask to borrow it. It will be somebody who's on your side and perhaps who the hack already knows, somebody who is more closely involved than you are at the moment. But somebody who can be persuaded that your support or what you know will add to his position. If you and they approach the media together you can be seen as being a stakeholder, and you're in.

Be careful though in respecting the bits of the story that they own: don't effectively appoint yourself their spokesperson just because you've now got the ear of a journalist, and squeeze them out.

Who to approach, how – and when

It's crucial that you speak in person to the hack, especially if you haven't spoken before. Remember, you have to control the narrative. Send an email or leave a message and it will likely get overlooked or glanced at and forgotten. So speak to the journo, explain your story – briefly! – then they're likely to ask: '*Do you have something you can send me?*' Yes! You have the press release. And you send it to them immediately, while the conversation is still fresh.

Believe it or not, journalists are only human. And remember, they want to hear from you. (Except, ironically, during elections, but that's another story...) Aim to be that very phone call they've been waiting for all day. But do it in the right way. Not too early in the morning, certainly not before 10am. Nobody will be in. News doesn't usually begin happening till after breakfast. And normally in a daily newspaper there will be a news conference soon after that to discuss what they're going to put in the paper that day. It's sometimes a good idea to try to get in ahead of that meeting, so your contact can bring up your story with the news editor.

But on the other hand, don't ring too late in the afternoon. By 4pm they've collected their stories for the day and they're writing them up. It's not a good idea to interrupt a hack when he or she is in the middle of writing that they hope will be a by-lined front page tomorrow.

Local or national?

Start with the local news media, and remember that all local stories are a variation on 'Local Boy Makes Good'. Your story may also interest the nationals – after all, just about every national story begins life as a local story somewhere - especially if it fits into a narrative of their own.

If the newspaper is a weekly then deadlines are important. The lifecycle of a weekly goes something like this:

- Monday: news gathering
- Tuesday, finalizing the news
- Wednesday: last 't's crossed and off to the printers
- Thursday: published
- Friday: on the streets

So you need to get your story to the news desk during Monday if you can, while they still have a whole paper to fill. If it's half decent it will be included: it may be dislodged later by something more pressing, but for the moment it's in and the other story has to fight to replace you.

Tuesday would do, but that puts you in the position of having to dislodge something else in the fight for space. If it's Wednesday then you'll have to have a hell of a story to make them remake the whole paper.

And there's no point calling on Thursday or Friday because they're not interested. They'll all be in the pub.

But co-ordinating different media deadlines is important. If you're also going to a daily newspaper then don't do it on a Thursday, otherwise your friends at the weekly won't be able to report on it till the next week, by which time it will

be stale and they will be reluctant to use it. (Television is particularly sniffy about not getting first bite.)

Broadcasting

Radio can broadcast what you have to say at any time, of course, but typically you'll be invited in on the next day's breakfast programme to do a two-minute live slot. TV used to be more bureaucratic, when they had whole camera crews to organize. These days the technology allows much greater freedom, but TV like all news media is financially strapped and they have to be parsimonious about how they use their cameras. Give them time, it's best not done spontaneously, and it's not a bad idea to start with TV and ask when they can get there, then organize the rest around them.

But TV is picky. It's a visual medium. Your story doesn't have to be hugely important, just provide some vaguely interesting moving pictures. Two blokes talking to each other in a room won't hack it.

One way to organize your deadlines is by using an embargo. That's to say, you give them the story on the understanding that they don't publish it before the time and date you specify. Journalists respect embargoes but don't usually like them much, so don't use them too frequently.

But a word of caution. You want to find a journo who is *simpatico*, of course, and especially if you have a human interest that's likely to give them a good by-line, you'll find they're very good at being simpatico. But your interests will never exactly coincide, so if you can don't give them everything you have. Try and keep a little in reserve. Remember, it's your story and you want to control it, to own it. Give away the whole thing and your friendly journalist will do with it whatever he or she likes.

That doesn't mean it will be used cynically or you'll be misquoted. But what is most important to the hack probably won't coincide with what you think is important. Any decent journo is going to write his other story from whatever you've given them, so you have to make your press release as like what the hack wants to write as possible.

So be disciplined. Less is more. If you keep your story to one side of A4 it's likely that most of it will be used. Sprawl it over three pages and, always supposing your hack can be bothered to read it all – two thirds of it will be edited out – no doubt including that killer revelation which was (to you at least) the really important bit.

The shape of the story will be changed

Journalists are notoriously careless with other people's interests. It's not deliberate, but your man has just written about the tragic loss of a family pet, then he comes to your bit about woods or whatever, and next in line is a motorway pile-up. So, he'll rush through yours and once it's done it's forgotten. That treasured family snapshot you lent him, and he promised to return will be lost under the debris on his desk.

For that reason, it's usually more rewarding to speak to specialist correspondents – health or environment or business or whatever – though these days local papers haven't got two ha'pennies to rub together and they can rarely afford specialists. You'll still usually find them on the nationals though.

You've already checked out who you want to interest in your story. So, what's the secret of gaining their attention? No secret, but just be interesting and to the point. Remember that every news story begins with the words *'In a shock move today...'* unless there is a good reason. There is always a good reason, but your journo always wants the next phone call to be that story. So, make yours as close to that as you can. Don't over-sell it but try upfront to make it interesting.

You'll want to know you're speaking to the right person, but as with any phone call politeness counts. Announce who you are first, then come to the point. Be specific about what's about to happen. If you've got the right hack then he or she should know the background to your project, but don't assume it. Provide a little context to allow them to switch focus from whatever they were concentrating on before.

Example:

'Hello, this is John Smith. Who am I speaking to?'

'Sandra McDuff.'

'Sandra, I have a news story I think will interest you. It's about the plans to cut down Beechcombe Wood at Stowmarket to build new housing... A group of local people oppose the plan, and we have ...'

Write down his or her name. Make notes as you go. But above all listen. Does he or she sound immediately interested? If yes, excellent. But if not, you'll have to give them a bit more until they're hooked.

Sometimes the conversation will tend to drift into other things, so go with it. Don't be afraid to gossip, as long as the hack starts it and seems to welcome it. If the gossip is about your project you may learn lots that will be useful. Don't be afraid to ask questions about what the journo knows. He or she won't give away anything confidential, but if there is nothing secret about it and it helps stand up your project (and so his or her story) then they are quite likely to be happy to chat.

Using MPs

Approaching an MP is always useful, because it gives your story better clout with the media. 'Woods Protestors Urge MP to Act' and so on.

But which MPs? First, if your project involves a specific case then parliamentary protocol says you have to go to the local constituency MP, of whichever party. If your project isn't likely to get support from him or her, it doesn't matter. A refusal gives you ammunition: 'MP Refuses to Back Woods Protestors'. And don't write a polite note: you'll just get the usual dismissive acknowledgement from the MP's secretary and the MP will probably never even have seen the letter.

So, you need to phone. But whatever you do don't call the local office. Quite probably it won't be staffed, or if it is you'll find Someone whose only job seems to be to keep people like you from getting under the MP's feet. So instead, you call the MP's Westminster office. The House of Commons number is 020-7219 3000. Ask for the MP's office. Quite likely you'll find a recorded message, in which case ring back. As with journos, you need to speak to somebody in person. It won't be the MP, it will be the secretary or assistant or researcher, but these are the important people and they will have the MP's ear. Tell them your story and again back it up immediately with an email.

You can find all MPs' details at www.parliament.uk. Read their biography too: it may provide you with more information.

But as long as you're looking at a wider issue than something confined to one constituency – like the preservation of woodland in general, rather than Beechcombe Wood in particular – then you can talk to any MP who is prepared to show an interest. The MPs' biographies will tell you their interests, so if they coincide with yours there's a good chance that what you have to say will interest him or her – and therefore whichever staff member you speak to. Having any MP on your side always looks good. On the same Parliament site, look up the select committees for one that looks promising, and read through the membership. Any one of those might be a likely partner.