



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Media relations

A handbook for
National Commissions and
UNESCO's partners

Michel Barton

Though increasingly recognized as essential, media relations continue too often to be treated as an afterthought: something to be done, late and in a hurry, time permitting. This is much more than regrettable. Keeping ordinary citizens informed about issues and developments in the fields of culture, education, the sciences and communication is a key part of the UNESCO mandate.

Two myths about media relations need to be dispelled. The first is that they imply an important financial investment. Nonsense. All that is required is a good story – facts, figures, analysis – distributed in good time to the right people. That takes a certain amount of energy, but very little money. The second myth is that media relations are a complex matter to be handled by specialists only. The truth is that theory in this field would hold in a thimble. What media relations require to be effective is an understanding of how the press and electronic media work, common sense – and practice.

This handbook provides practical advice on the do's and don'ts of relations with the media. Its purpose is to encourage more National Commissions, as well as Clubs and other friends of UNESCO, to reach out to the media so that UNESCO's messages and values may carry greater weight in public opinions everywhere.

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Did Somebody Say 'Communication'?

Public information, public relations, communication: international institutions seem to use these words interchangeably, moving from one to another and back again as successive waves of 'reform' come and go. Are they different from one another? And are they complementary or contradictory?

First things first. In publicly financed institutions such as UNESCO, public information constitutes an organic function. Keeping the public abreast of developments and debates in the worlds of education, science, culture, social sciences and communication is one of the reasons for which UNESCO exists. Doing it and doing it right is not only clever; it is an essential part of UNESCO's mandate.

Reflecting UNESCO's broad and diverse areas of responsibility, its Bureau of Public Information seeks to draw attention to a wide range of activities. In doing so, it relies on the research and expertise of colleagues throughout the house to spotlight important social and ethical issues, to nurture the democratic debate – with facts, figures and analysis – and to press for change where change is required. Public information is, in other words, one of the organization's principal weapons in the pursuit of its fundamental objectives.

A recipe for failure

There is enormous, probably limitless interest in the public and media for new data and insights on issues that are



UNESCO's bread and butter, such as cloning and bioethics in general, the state of oceans and coastlines, the sharing of freshwater resources, the education of girls, the digital divide, freedom of the press, teachers' salaries and working conditions, endangered cultural treasures – the list is a long one. This demand affords UNESCO with constantly renewed opportunities to advertise its concerns and programmes and to irrigate public opinion with its values.

In all cases however, what the public and media hunger for is information about the issue itself, not about the institution – and even less about its servants or component units. Failing to recognize this as self-evident is a recipe for failure.

Results periodically achieved – massive, worldwide media coverage of UNESCO's reports and initiatives on EFA, trafficking of cultural goods, underwater heritage, disappearing languages, for example – have underlined the enormous appeal of the research and analysis for which UNESCO is uniquely qualified. More, better and more frequent reports are needed to meet that demand – and to put UNESCO back in the news.

A challenge to complacency

Addressing as it must, complex, often painful social realities, public information that emanates from United Nations agencies cannot please all of the people all of the time. Genuine information is, by definition, a challenge to complacency which may at times lead to controversy and elicit protests. Seeking at all costs to avoid such developments is incompatible with the public information function. While there can be no place for gratuitous provocation, it must be accepted that no one has ever

produced an omelette – in this case achieving influence over public opinion – without breaking some eggs.

Public information's essential currency is credibility in the eyes of the media. International organizations know, by painful experience, that this is not a given. Achieving and maintaining media credibility is above all an exercise in transparency which should be undertaken on the understanding that the reputation of international organizations must and will ultimately rest on the quality and relevance of their 'real world' contribution.

Empty posturing

In the private sector as in politics, public relations are more often than not a question of putting one's best foot forward. Success is never guaranteed. Businesses and politicians are expected to have public relation strategies, but to describe their pronouncements as 'PR' is not a compliment. In plain English it means rubbish, or something ruder. Taxpayer-financed institutions cannot afford risks of this kind. They look especially bad when suspected of self-promotion or empty posturing.

Public relations for organizations like UNESCO should mean one thing only: exchanging information and developing working relations with different target audiences – constituents, parliamentarians, international organizations, provincial and municipal authorities, civic groups, NGOs, academic institutions, religious organizations, private enterprises – using language and supports appropriate to each.

Public relations are, first and foremost, about dialogue. Their purpose is to build networks, to forge temporary or lasting alliances in order to achieve programme objectives:

ratifications, project completions, policy changes, for example. In some instances this dialogue should lead to operational partnerships, fund raising and other forms of collaboration. Public relations thereby represent an important entry point into the UN system for a wide range of potential partners.

It stands to reason therefore that responsibility for engaging in public relations cannot be left to any single department. They must be conducted, as a matter of course and on a permanent basis, by directors and programme managers, indeed by all substantive officers at Headquarters and in the field. Some will, on occasion, require material support. All rightfully expect policy guidance. Information kits and videos are welcome but not nearly as important as a regular internal flow of information on what must be clear, coherent and vigorously pursued objectives.

So what about ‘communication’?

What is left to ‘communication’ is the heart of the matter, that which speaks louder than words: action. What will always matter more than what we say is what we do – or fail to do.

Communications suffuse every aspect of the work of most UN bodies and agencies, including UNESCO. Standards, guidelines, codes of conduct, technical assistance: all are about sharing and spreading knowledge and values in order to affect change.

Successful communications imply transparency – public information – and outreach – public relations. But they, above all, require courage, conviction and initiative. Value-based endeavours are judged in the end, not by the noise

they temporarily generate but by the difference they make in the lives of people. Nothing new there.

What is perhaps new in a number of international organizations is a growing reliance on marketing techniques long on image-polishing but short on substance: glitter-studded media-oriented events, contrived ‘photo opportunities’, glossy brochures. Some also seem more comfortable with slogans and sound bites, with ghostwritten ‘op-ed’ pieces on consensual subjects than with the rougher give and take of press conferences and interviews with well-informed, aggressive reporters.

Those who claim expertise and leadership in social, economic or humanitarian matters, among others, must expect searching questions. These are inherent to democratic processes and should be welcomed as management tools.

There is nothing wrong with gloss and glitter or with controlled appearances in the media provided these come in addition to – and not as a substitute for – genuine public information and public relations activities. One comes down to what you can afford. The other reflects – and projects – how significant you might be.

There are no easy shortcuts in the battle for hearts and minds.

Adapted from an article originally published in the May 2001 issue of *Union*, the magazine of the International Labour Office’s staff union.

Public information what for?

A-classic mistake is to think of Public Information as a support service, on a par with personnel or procurement. The truth is that keeping the public informed and alive to issues under the organization's mandate is a core function: one of the reasons why the organization exists. Its purpose is to: share knowledge / raise awareness / change attitudes / mobilize support / change policies.

Public information should not be confused with advertising or propaganda, though these may be by-products. The image and reputation of international organizations depends less on self-proclaimed successes than on the relevance and quality of their real-world contributions.

Institutions of the United Nations system must set their own media agenda. It is amazing how many senior UN officers turn to PI professionals for assistance only when facing hostile questions from media. It is almost always too late by then. Experience suggests that persistent criticism, when it occurs, is, in most cases, richly deserved. Better to have been in the media regularly, with stories based on the organization's own analysis and activities, so that criticism, when it comes, can be put into perspective.



Public information: different tools for different audiences

International organizations must communicate with multiple audiences: Governments, other international organizations, NGOs, academic institutions, parliamentarians, local authorities, professional networks, schools, the public at large. All deserve attention, but it is rarely possible to communicate successfully with all at once.

Different tools are required to communicate with different audiences:

- Governments, IGOs: meetings and documents.
- NGOs, networks of specialists: web, newsletters.
- Schools: teaching aids, kits, posters.
- Constituency (National commissions, partners, staff): magazine.
- Parliamentarians: hearings, brochures, tailored briefings.
- Media: press releases, B-rolls, press conferences, media advisories.

It is counterproductive to issue a press release containing no real information for the sole purpose of pleasing a partner or donor. Doing so regularly, as so many organizations do, does great harm to credibility and makes it difficult to be taken seriously by the media.

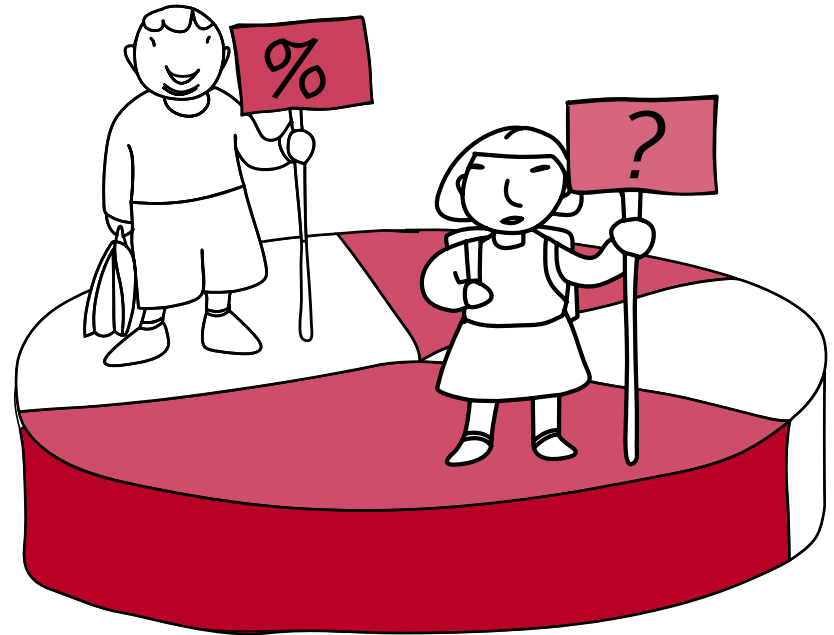


Media relations: what is the story (where is the beef)?

To capture the media's – and the public's – attention, you must have a story to tell. And you must remember that a story is always based on substance – the real lives of real people – almost never on institutional process. Meetings, conferences, round-tables do not by themselves constitute stories. What the public and the media hunger for is information about the issues those events are supposed to address, not about the inner workings of institutions. Failing to recognize this as self-evident is a common mistake – and a recipe for failure.

Staories are almost always about people. Refugees, victims of war or epidemics, girls in school, citizens with access to the internet: are their numbers rising/declining? Is their situation improving/worsening? Where? Since when? According to whom? Who is doing what about it? What are the prospects/obstacles?

The really successful stories – those picked up by all, or nearly all, major media in a given country or region – are almost always based on solid, up-to-date reports providing analysis and comparative statistics.



Media relations: adopting a news-oriented approach

All media play a role in shaping public opinion, but none are more important than the mass media: morning newspapers, evening news programmes on television and news bulletins on radio all day long. To reach out to them it makes sense to adopt a news-oriented approach.

News = story + today. It's as simple as that.

While process (meetings, conferences, seminars) almost never constitutes a story in itself, it often does provide the required hook. Hook = the event you hang the story on to turn it into news. Examples: An issue to be addressed at a meeting opening... TOMORROW / An appeal made in a speech delivered... TODAY.

Identify stories of potential interest and the hook allowing you, on a given day, to turn it into news. The resulting calendar of media-oriented activities = a Media Action Plan.

Analytical reports (on literacy rates, the number of girls in school, the state of coastlines, the distribution of water resources, etc.) provide some of the best opportunities to attract media interest. Those providing quantified and comparative information are almost irresistible. Each should be the subject, at minimum, of a press release.

When a conference or meeting provides the hook, experience shows the best chance to attract the media's attention comes on the eve of the event when the story can focus on the issue and the stakes involved. A 'curtain-raiser' spelling these out is more likely to be attractive

than a press release based on the inevitably consensual conclusions reached at the meeting's end.

Op-Ed (Opinion and Editorial) articles can be an excellent way to convey a message. Words of advice:

- An Op-Ed piece should be relatively short: approximately 600 words.
- It must be signed.
- It must be focused and make a point, clearly.
- If distributed internationally, it should be sent to no more than one newspaper per country.
- Before sending it, identify the editor responsible for Op-Eds, and send your text to his/her personal attention, with a brief covering note.



Writing a successful press release



The most important part, by far, of a press release is its opening paragraph. That is where the 'news' must be presented. If it is a survey/report you are presenting, tell us right away –in the very first sentence – what its main finding/conclusion is. And tell us immediately after that how significant that appears to be. If you are bringing attention to a meeting/conference, start by telling us what important issues it will be addressing, not by the formal title of the affair and the names of the presiding officers and VIPs in attendance.

Para 1 WHAT (*'The number of girls entering secondary school/ the amount of freshwater available per capita/trafficking in stolen art objects has risen/fallen over the past year/decade suggesting that ... according to UNESCO'*).

Para 2 WHO (*UNESCO, in a study entitled '...'*).
WHEN (*in a report made public Today/ in a conference opening Tomorrow*).
WHERE (*in Paris, New Delhi, Timbuktu...*).

Para 3 This is a good place to include a quote, by the Director or the author of the report, for example, articulating the key message you want to convey. (If you make that quote up yourself, make sure the person quoted agrees...).

Para 4 Develop para 1. How many girls, how much water

Para 5 More on para 1. With what regional/local variations? Highest/lowest figures.

Paras 6, 7, 8, maybe more Still more on para 1. *What, according to the report, are the causes of these trends?* There might be several, in which case a separate paragraph should be devoted to each significant one.

Final para(s) More on para 2. Place conference/report in wider context: is it part of a series? Are follow-up mechanisms/ meetings foreseen? Have similar surveys been conducted in other regions? This may be a good place to provide some web-links.

At the very end Give the name, phone number and e-mail of the person who can be contacted by journalists seeking more information.

Disseminating information to the media:

Timing is of the essence

It must be accepted that the media, not institutions, set the rules. The first and most important of these is that news cannot wait. You must be aware of the production schedule of the media you are approaching. If a story reaches the media too late in the day, its chances of appearing on the evening news or in the papers the following morning are poor. Obvious, but bureaucracies have great difficulties with this. Clearance procedures routinely take far more time than they should resulting far too often in missed deadlines.

Morning newspapers all over the world run roughly along the same schedule. Journalists gather for the daily editorial meeting around 9 a.m. They emerge from it one hour later and start working their 'beat'. By 3 or 4 p.m., they are under pressure to finalize their article(s) for the following day's edition. That means that your best chance to reach them usefully is between 10 a.m. and 3 or 4 p.m. at the latest. In other words, a journalist's day, as far as you are concerned, is only five or six hours long.

Nor does a journalist's week last seven days. Weekend editions are usually put together by separate, smaller, crews. Much of the material they contain is 'pre-cooked', prepared in advance, leaving less space for last minute news. Issuing a story on a Friday (or a Thursday in Muslim countries) – for the weekend papers – should, for that reason, be avoided whenever possible.

If your story is essentially about finance and economics, do not aim for the Monday papers. Because there is no stock-exchange on weekends, many papers feature only token Business sections on Mondays, sections where your story might have had the best chance to appear.

Holding a press conference at 6 p.m. on a Friday – the time most conferences seem to end – is next to useless.



Press conferences

Too many are called for the wrong reasons, at the wrong time.

A-press conference is an information tool, not some sort of glamorous event. Its object is to convey new and specific information to the media, not to offer a prestige-bestowing stage to VIPs.

There should preferably be one speaker, two at the most, accompanied by a moderator whose role is to call the conference to order, give the floor to the main speaker, direct the question and answer period and call a close to the proceedings.

The main speaker may be accompanied by a small number of colleagues who should sit on the sidelines. But the majority of the people in the room should be journalists, not staff members and assorted personnel.

The main speaker should keep his/her opening statement as short as the subject permits. 5 to 7 minutes is ideal. 20 minutes is almost certainly too much.

A-press release detailing the information provided should be distributed to journalists attending the press conference and distributed widely, by fax or e-mail, to those who cannot. The goal is to get the information out, not to pack the room.



The best time for a press conference is between 11:00 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., weekdays. Calling a press conference in the evening, especially on the last working day of the week, is likely to have disappointing results.

At the end of the press conference, time should be provided for brief one-on-one interviews with radio journalists and others.

Interviews

Interview requests are welcome. They should receive immediate attention. But that does not mean rushing in unprepared.

If approached, find out first what the reporter is after and determine who in your office or beyond is best qualified to reply. The technical expert is often a better bet in this regard than the senior-most person available.

Anyone interviewed should stick to their areas of competence and responsibility and refuse to be drawn beyond these.

Find out also what kind of media you are dealing with. If it is a newspaper you will want to know whether the story will be published in a specific section of the paper (Education, Environment, Society, etc.) or in the news section. This will help you to picture the readers you are addressing. If it is radio, ask whether the interview will be live or recorded, and how long it will last. This will tell you how much you can hope to say.

Ask the reporter what areas he/she wishes to go into. In many countries, reporters will not agree to provide precise questions in advance, if only to avoid stilted answers. But most will readily discuss, in more general terms, the subject they are interested in.

Give yourself the time to gather your thoughts. If the interview request comes by phone, ask the reporter to call back after 10 or 15 minutes, or call him/her back yourself.



Do not over-rehearse your answers – it will only make you nervous – but force yourself to formulate beforehand the principal points you intend to make. Having done this, speak with the reporter promptly. Most are working on tight deadlines and may no longer be available if you wait too long.

In a radio or television interview you can only hope to make one, two or, at the very most, three distinct points. Make sure you have defined these in your head before starting the interview. Do not bring a crib sheet with a long list of points: you would likely choke on it. Right before the interview is about to start ask the reporter what his/her first question will be. This will help you to get off on the right foot. Once you have started, your initial – and perfectly natural – jitters will wear off.

Television

Feature length videos (25 minutes or more) are extremely expensive to produce and generally have a limited impact. Major television channels are rarely interested in institutional products of this kind and most, as a consequence, are watched by captive audiences only. It is much cheaper, and vastly more rewarding, to produce short (4–5 minutes), unedited videos – known as B-rolls in the trade – aimed at the evening news programmes watched by mass audiences.

B-rolls contain raw footage serving to illustrate the contents of a particular press release (floods/drought, teachers/pupils/schools, cultural sites/events, etc.) thus making it attractive for television news programmes. B-rolls, by definition, do not contain voice-over commentaries. But they may, and should, include a brief (30 seconds) statement – a sound-bite - from an expert/project manager/director articulating the key message being conveyed.

Each B-roll should be accompanied by a copy of the relevant press release and by a note – a ‘dope sheet’ – indicating precisely what is shown, for how many seconds and where it was shot

B-rolls should be made available to television channels on magnetic tapes of the type used by professionals: Betacam (analogue or digital) or DV cam – not on the VHS tapes you may use at home. Make sure also to find out which system – Pal-SECAM or NTSC – is used by broadcasters in the country(ies) targeted for distribution.



Launching a major story

step by step

1 Fix an Embargo date and hour before which the story may not be published or broadcast and print it in bold lettering on all relevant material (report, executive summary, press release, B-roll) distributed to the media. (Example: **EMBARGO** - Not for publication or broadcast before 1 p.m., local time (11 a.m. GMT) on 10 February 2003). Always give a GMT timeline if operating in more than one time zone. Do not make the mistake of posting the press release on your website before the chosen hour: you would, by so doing, break your own embargo and make it impossible to ask discipline of others.

2 Two weeks or so before the embargo date, distribute a short media advisory – a ‘teaser’ – announcing the forthcoming release of a major report, promising answers to key questions raised (give examples). This will give editors time to prepare, order photos and graphs, ask for an editorial, dispatch reporters here and there to give a local flavour to the story, etc.

3 Write a detailed press release, including meaningful statistical tables whenever possible.

4 Make individual phone contacts with each of the media targeted and find within each one the person responsible for the department – Health, Education, Sciences, Culture, Business – most likely to be interested in your story. After doing it a few times, you will know whom to call. Beware of weekly magazines. Whereas daily newspapers are used to and tend to be respectful of embargos, weeklies are often tempted to ignore them if the release day does not suit them.



5 Hand carry or send by DHL/TNT/FedEx the press release, the report or document it is based on (on CD if too voluminous) and an Executive Summary of the report, if one is available, to each of the journalists who have confirmed interest.

6 Make experts available for interviews, under embargo, by phone or in person.

7 Contact the news department in all targeted television channels and offer the B-roll to them, taking time to tell them what, in a nutshell, the story is about and what is on the B-roll.

8 Hold a press conference half an hour before the embargo is lifted.

9 Make experts available for radio interviews, in as many languages as possible, immediately following the press conference.