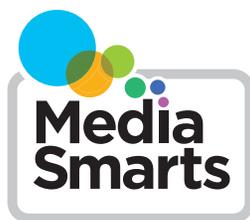


making your  
**voice**  
**heard**

A MEDIA TOOLKIT FOR YOUTH



# Are you frustrated with today's media coverage of young people?

In recent years, the mainstream media have featured alarming stories involving teens: cyberbullying, high school shootings and stabbings, sexting, drugs, youth gangs...

These incidents make exciting headlines, but they offer a distorted image of young peoples' lives today.

While most teens are positive, contributing members of their communities, that's seldom what's reflected in media. Too often we see stereotypes of teenagers as gang members, powerless victims or social outsiders.

This media toolkit offers ways to change negative youth stereotypes in the news.

We've talked with youth-based organizations, community groups, journalists and educators to develop a resource that will help you to both understand media and to gain access to them.

If you have some input into the way media cover news and events, you can help promote a more balanced image of youth.

The toolkit sections listed below will help you understand how the news industry works, how stereotypes function in media and how to approach media to get positive youth voices and stories heard.

**"I think that people our age are portrayed by the media as violent, lazy and uneducated. I myself have held down two jobs, am going to high school full-time and take high school classes on the Internet. I would like to see, for once, something put forward to the public to let them know we are not lazy people."** - "Speak Out" MediaSmarts' discussion group for youth

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# The News Industry

What sorts of stories make it into the news and why? Who decides which stories get reported and from what angle? What challenges do reporters face and how do these challenges affect the news we read and watch?

## WHAT IS NEWS?

News has two priorities: it must be current and it must mean something to people. A story about the environment and a story about the Oscars can both be newsworthy for different reasons.

On the surface at least, the objective of news is to inform the audience. It's the job of all news media to tell people what's going on in their community - locally, nationally or globally. In this sense, news media provide a valuable public service.

But media are also businesses - and like all businesses they have to make money to keep going. Audiences today can get news and information from many different sources. This increased competition is putting pressure on media outlets to attract advertising dollars to keep them running. This is especially true for privately owned media, but it's also a concern for publicly-owned media (like the CBC) that need to attract audiences and ad revenues to survive.

Media outlets have to cater to their audiences and they compete with one another to provide what they think their "customers" want. This can certainly mean honest and factual news reporting. But it can also mean shorter, more exciting stories; flashy, sexy or

shocking images; crime, death, disaster, tragedy; confrontation, violence, controversy; or anything else that might attract viewers or readers. When taken to extremes, "news" can become just another type of sensational entertainment.

For more information on the differences between mainstream, community and online media, see the [Accessing Media](#) section.



## WHO DOES WHAT?

*Large news organizations have many employees who perform many specialized jobs. But when it comes to increasing your visibility in media, the key contacts you need to know are reporters and editors.*



### REPORTERS

Reporters are responsible for coming up with or following through on story ideas, researching and interviewing for them and writing the stories in an interesting way. They are often assigned a beat (a field or subject on which to report) such as politics, entertainment or health. Some media outlets may even have a youth beat. If there isn't one, take note of who usually covers youth-related issues, perhaps the reporters on the city or education beat.

Reporters may investigate story ideas themselves or may be given ideas by their assigning editors. Either way, they're expected to follow up on the idea by identifying and contacting sources and doing background research.

Reporters are usually open to suggestions for story ideas from readers, viewers or other sources. Journalists always want to beat other news outlets to a good story, so they're particularly interested in new ideas or unexplored angles. Social media are especially useful tools for this: Cory Doctorow, a columnist for The Guardian, actively asks his Twitter followers for story ideas; Andy Carvin, a journalist with National Public Radio, takes it a step farther and has his followers help him research stories, find sources and even debunk misinformation in the press.



### EDITORS/PRODUCERS

Editors (in print media) and producers (on TV) are the gatekeepers who have the power to decide which stories are newsworthy and which are not.

They oversee reporters and they're responsible for the content of the newspaper or news show. It's their job to keep track of what's being covered and how. They sort through press releases sent to the paper or station and decide which stories to cover.

Most newspapers, magazines and radio and television stations have assigning producers who assign story ideas to reporters. They often decide what angle reporters should take and even who they should interview.

Editors and producers also evaluate what their reporters write and have the power to approve it before it gets published or goes on the air. Most outlets will have two or more layers of editors who will look at a piece before it airs or goes into print.



## COPY EDITORS

Copy editors read proofs for errors, both grammatical and factual, to ensure accuracy and to avoid any legal repercussions. They also usually write the headlines for articles and often write the captions for images.

Headlines are important because they are the first part of a story that usually catches a reader's eye. Headlines have to distill the essence of the story into a single sentence, which can be problematic. It is easy to fall back on stereotypes when trying to express a complex idea in only a few words and it's not unusual for headlines to give a more distorted or one-sided picture of an issue than the story that follows it.

For more information on issues concerning headlines and stereotyping, see the [\*\*\*Stereotypes\*\*\*](#) section.

## WHAT CHALLENGES DO JOURNALISTS FACE?

Tight deadlines are a fact of life in journalism since newspapers and news shows are generally distributed daily. A TV reporter may be handed a story idea (or two) at 9:00 a.m., which must be ready to be aired for that day's newscast at 12:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. If they're working for a 24-hour news network such as CNN or CBC News Network they may face shorter deadlines. A radio reporter may have deadlines throughout the day as radio often has news updates every hour.

The reporters must interview their sources and write their stories by mid-afternoon, allowing time to review and edit their taped interviews and footage into a story if the story is due at 6:00 p.m. While print newspapers still have daily deadlines, most newspapers now post their articles online as soon as they've been approved by the editor in hopes of "scooping" the competition. This means that as well as the deadline for the print edition, reporters are under pressure to get the story out as soon as possible.

For this reason, most successful planned news events (such as press conferences) are held in the morning, usually between 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. This gives the reporter enough time to attend the event, interview other sources afterwards and go back to the newsroom to write and prepare the story.

These daily deadlines make it difficult for reporters to interview young people. Even if a journalist wants a youth perspective in a story, most young people aren't available during the day – they're busy at school.

Of course, not all stories are breaking news or need to be written and produced in the course of a single working day. "Features", in-depth pieces that cover an issue or event from different angles, can take days and even weeks to research, write, record, edit and produce. As a result, features offer journalists the opportunity to spend more time exploring issues and to present them in a thoughtful way. Also, feature writers may be better able to help you get your side of the story across.

Social media can also connect young people and reporters. Journalists are turning to Facebook and Twitter to find sources and to talk to people affected by a story. As young people are particularly active on social media, they can play a leading role in the conversation.

Newspapers and television and radio stations are also competing with Facebook and Twitter. Reporters now have multiple deadlines throughout the day to get stories online and getting the story out first can sometimes be more important than getting the story right!

When the Boston Marathon was bombed in 2013, the news broke first on Twitter. In an attempt to attract viewers and stay on top of the story, CNN and other media outlets began reporting on unverified rumours. Innocent people were also accused on Reddit and Twitter, but social media are not held to the same journalistic standards as CNN.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, social media can be a valuable tool for correcting misinformation. When news outlets began reporting that Israeli weapons were being used in Libya in 2011, Andy Carvin called upon his Twitter followers to help him disprove the erroneous reports.<sup>2</sup> During Hurricane Sandy, fake photographs and untrue reports began to circulate both online and off. The Tumblr “Is Twitter Wrong?” (among other sources) began sifting through the copious amounts of information to determine fact from fiction as quickly as possible.<sup>3</sup> Turning to social media can be a good first step when you see or read something in the news that you know is not accurate.

For more information on the pressures of deadlines and the commercial concerns that affect news coverage, see the **Stereotypes** section.

What sources  
can we trust  
and when?



# Stereotypes

Judging by the stories you've seen in recent years, what image of teenagers is most often portrayed by news media in your community? Do the headlines give a balanced perspective on the lives of today's youth?

## **HALIFAX TEEN CHARGED AFTER AXE ATTACK**

The Globe and Mail, May 2013

## **5 TEENS TREATED IN OVERDOSE INCIDENT**

CBC News, October 2012

## **MAN SWARMED, BEATEN BY TEENS**

CTV News, May 2013

## WHAT IS A STEREOTYPE?

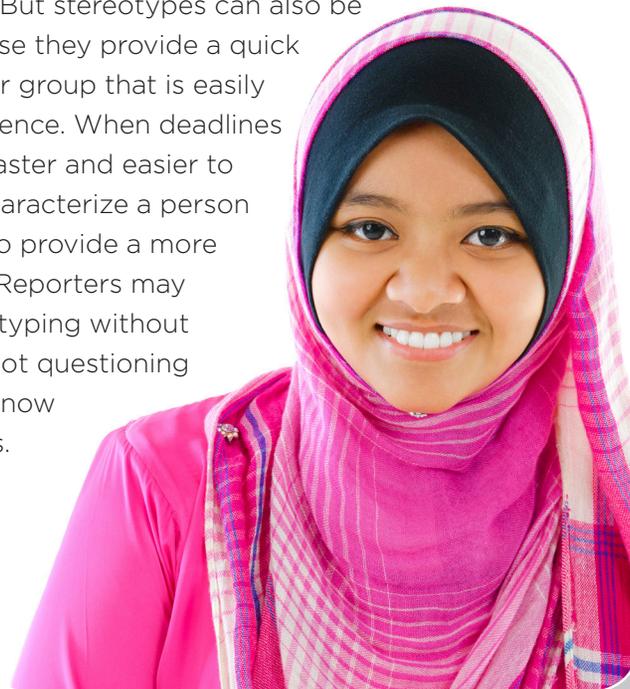
Stereotypes are as old as human culture itself. They reflect ideas that groups of people hold about others who are different from them.

A stereotype can be embedded in a single word or phrase (such as, "jock" or "nerd"), an image or a combination of words and images. The stereotype that's promoted is easily recognized and understood by others who share the same views.

People may be stereotyped with traits that are seen as being positive ("Asians are good at math") or negative ("Muslims are

terrorists") but even "positive" stereotypes can be harmful because they ignore the uniqueness of individuals and paint all members of a group with the same brush.

Stereotypes may appear in media because of the biases or unquestioned assumptions of writers, directors, producers, reporters and editors. But stereotypes can also be useful to media because they provide a quick identity for a person or group that is easily recognized by an audience. When deadlines loom, it's sometimes faster and easier to use a stereotype to characterize a person or situation than it is to provide a more complex explanation. Reporters may also fall prey to stereotyping without realizing it simply by not questioning what they think they know about different groups.



## THE ROLE OF STEREOTYPES IN THE NEWS

Although most journalists try to be objective and factual in reporting events, there is no such thing as a news story without a point of view. Every news story is influenced by the attitudes and backgrounds of the reporters, photographers and editors who select and edit the images and information they offer us. Bias can be unintentional or deliberate, depending on the motives of news gatherers and the sources they rely on.

Most reporters and editors are adults who, naturally, see the world from an adult's point of view.

They may also assume that their audiences are mostly adults with similar views. Age-related bias may influence how much importance is attached to issues concerning youth and the angle that's taken on such issues.

The basic "inverted pyramid" structure of a news story - which always begins with "Who, What, When, Where, Why and How" and then adds more detail as the story goes on to make it easier for editors to shorten it if they need to - can lead to stereotyping because it may be just those additional details that add depth and context to a story and keep it from stereotyping.

Stereotypes can also be a side effect of tight deadlines. Reporters for daily newspapers or news shows often have to research, write and present several stories a day. They may not have time to present several sides of an issue. They may need a quick, convenient, pre-packaged image and a stereotypical word or headline can provide that.

Because the news industry is under pressure to attract readers and viewers, it has to produce stories that are compelling, short and easily understandable to a general audience. By using stereotypes, a complex issue involving people with complex motives can be reduced to a simple conflict between "good guys" and "bad guys." This can happen when media try to make real events appear more dramatic or when a situation needs to be explained in a 10-second sound bite.

For instance, the rumours after the Boston Marathon bombings inaccurately blamed a "dark-skinned" individual for the crime, reinforcing the negative stereotyping of African Americans as criminals and of Arab Americans as terrorists. Stereotypes and rumours often go together as both are based on ignorance.

*"Positive doesn't sell. Who buys a newspaper to read about youth volunteering, or even having fun? Not many people. They would rather spend their money on something more important—like war, or even teenage vandalism."*

- "Speak Out" MediaSmarts' discussion group for youth

In the search for images and stories that will attract audiences, media tend to focus on issues of crime, violence, tragedy and disaster. There's also the idea that "dog bites man isn't news" – in other words, something is only newsworthy if it's unusual or surprising. Therefore, news is made up of stories that don't represent everyday experience – but a steady diet of these images can give us a distorted view of what goes on in the world.<sup>4</sup>

Another piece of conventional wisdom is that "if it bleeds, it leads," meaning that readers and audiences are most interested in violence and tragedy. This is not as widely held an attitude as it may once have been – many news outlets run regular "good news" stories, and these are more likely to "go viral" than bad news<sup>5</sup> – but violence and disaster are still likely to make an event more newsworthy.

These attitudes can mean that when young people (and members of other minority groups) do appear in the news, it is most often in the context of crime, drugs, violence, death, or some other alarming issue – which can lead to a distorted picture of that group.



## YOUTH STEREOTYPING AND ITS IMPACT

Stereotypes of a group of people can affect how society views them, and change society's expectations of them. With enough exposure to a stereotype, society may come to view this as being real rather than a chosen representation.

Another example is the public perception that youth crime is on the rise. This impression has been created largely through media coverage of alarming stories about high school shootings, property crimes, and incidents involving so-called youth gangs. Stories about youth riots in England and Stockholm and 'flash robs' in the U.S. and Canada create the impression that most youth are violent and anti-social.<sup>6</sup>

*"An important issue is how adults treat me just because I'm a teenager. Sure there are bad ones out there but I'm not one of them. It doesn't just hurt but it's disrespectful when security figures follow me around like I'm some kind of loser or criminal."*

- Canada's Teens, Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow

However, there is no factual basis for the belief that youth crime is on the rise. According to Statistics Canada, the severity and volume of youth crime has decreased over the last decade by 22 percent and violent crime has fallen by 12 percent. Between 2001 and 2011, the rate of youth charged with property offences, the most common kind of youth crime, dropped by 31 percent.

In 2011 seven percent of youth ages 12-17 came into contact with the criminal justice system and only three percent were formally charged with an offence. That means that 93 percent of youth are law-abiding, productive citizens.

Unfortunately, however, the impression that a significant percentage of youth are criminals persists and continues to influence the debate on crime in Canada.

(For example, in 2012, the Canadian Youth Criminal Justice Act was amended to increase penalties and jail time for youth based on the belief that a firm hand is required to keep dangerous youth in line.)

When youth are not seen as being criminals, they are often stereotyped as helpless victims. A moral panic has been created around youth safety, both online and in the real world. According to media, youth are in a constant and dangerous state of crisis and they lack the skills to properly protect themselves.<sup>7</sup> There are real dangers, but sensationalistic media coverage tends to cause more problems than it solves, by panicking adults and alienating frustrated teenagers.

Negative stereotypes not only affect how adults see teenagers, they influence how teenagers see themselves. The feeling that the rest of the world doesn't respect or understand you does little to encourage a positive sense of self-worth.

One youth from Montreal, aged 15, summed up the feelings of many teens: "Today's youths are intelligent but some adults don't seem to think so. We are people too. Youths are discriminated against and that's not right. To get through to young people, you have to listen to them, trust them, and respect them. The way I look and the music I listen to does not make me a "bad" person. I am my own person." (Canada's Teens: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow)



# Accessing Media

Many minority groups in society – such as African Canadians, Aboriginals, women, LGBTQ people – have all experienced the effects of negative stereotyping and the lack of positive images in media. Many of these groups have educated media about issues that concern them to challenge stereotypes and to provide more balanced coverage of their communities.

How can youth go about getting a story or event covered by media? How can we educate news reporters and editors about youth issues, and get them to change negative images of youth?

Many groups have been successful in challenging negative media stereotypes. It takes some planning, preparation and persistence but if you know how to access media, you can get your voice heard and your message across.

By actively trying to change the way media portray youth, young people can influence how the general public – and policymakers – view the roles of youth in society.

The following sections provide information to help you access mainstream, community, and online media. Background resources include tips on how to get youth perspectives into the news; and how to create your own communications strategy, organize media events, write news releases, and pitch story ideas to the press.

## ACCESSING MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Mainstream media consist of outlets that cover a larger territory than your own neighbourhood and are heard, read or viewed by a significant percentage of the public. Mainstream media outlets can be local, national and even international. For instance, your city's daily newspaper would be a mainstream media outlet, so would your local television and radio stations.

At the same time, some newspapers may be distributed throughout a city, or even across the country, without being mainstream. Some radio stations and newspapers focus on one or a small number of ethnic communities. Online media can also theoretically reach anyone in the world, but may be visited by only a small number of people.

Accessing mainstream media outlets takes plenty of persistence. The larger a media outlet, the harder it is to get its attention, but with some planning and determination, you can get it to notice you.

*Here are some tips...*

- 1. Get to know your local media.** Read your local newspapers and watch or listen to local news broadcasts. Get to know which stations and newspapers report on the issues you want to draw attention to – these outlets may be more willing to listen to you. Some media outlets even have young people on their editorial boards, or a youth advisory council to address coverage of youth-related issues.
- 2. Get to know the journalists who report on the issues you're interested in.** Most reporters are assigned to beats, so know which ones to contact for youth issues. Don't be intimidated when calling reporters or editors – remember that they're always on the lookout for story ideas.
- 3. Identify yourself and your organization or school.** When you call a reporter, give the information he or she needs to know about you as a source: your name, what organization you represent (if any), your school, and your position on the issue. Give some background on yourself, as well as information about your current activities. If you have an original story idea, mention that idea right off the top: you don't want to take more time than you need when talking to a journalist and it's important to let them know immediately what you have to offer.
- 4. If you have a potential slant in mind, mention it.** As a young person, you may be able to offer a youth perspective on a current news story. For example, if a reporter has covered a youth-related topic but has not actually interviewed any young people, you could provide the missing voice for that story.
- 5. Be patient.** Building a media presence takes time. The initial contact, perhaps a 10-minute phone call, might not result in a story about your project the next day. But once reporters and editors know you they'll be more likely to approach you in the future.

## ACCESSING COMMUNITY MEDIA

Daily newspapers and TV or radio news shows aren't the only outlets for you to be heard: you should also look into community media. Small community media are generally more accessible than mainstream media, since most have a mandate to address issues of local concern, so your story ideas are more likely to be covered. And because most community newspapers have very small staffs (there may be only one staff editor, and a number of freelance or volunteer reporters) you can often call up the newsroom and speak directly to the editor. If you're a strong writer, you can even offer to write the article!

Some neighbourhoods, schools and community groups produce their own weekly or bi-weekly newspapers, or may also put out a regular newsletter. For example, the Italian-Canadian community in Ottawa publishes the community newspaper *Il Postino*. Metroland Media Toronto runs several community papers in the region and you can submit press releases for free. You will need to research what is available in your area.

Your city or town may have a public-access TV channel which provides a place for community groups and citizens to make themselves heard. Community media often need volunteers, so this is a great way to learn how news media works from the inside and gain valuable experience for the future.

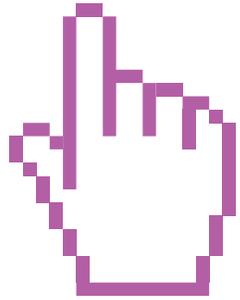
Community TV is constantly on the lookout for stories that don't get told on the mainstream TV stations, so getting their attention is generally easy. Just call your local community station, and introduce yourself and your organization to the programming director. He or she will probably give your information to a producer, who may decide to do a news story - based on your information, and a couple of follow-up interviews. They might

invite you into the studio for a more in-depth interview. Or if the producer thinks your story deserves more coverage, she may even decide to hold a "town hall" meeting - a studio discussion involving you and several other community members - or invite you to get involved in a regular show on youth issues. For example, RogersTV Ottawa's program "YouthEffect" takes a look at how youth are changing Ottawa for the better.

Radio stations in the community work much the same way. Universities and colleges often have radio stations staffed by students, but the programming often reflects the interests of the community at large. They are often interested in youth-related stories. When students in Quebec protested proposed tuition increases, for example, Concordia University's student station streamed the protests live online.

Once your story gets picked up in community media, you may start getting calls from mainstream reporters who often rely on community media for story ideas.





## ONLINE MEDIA

Almost all mainstream media outlets have websites, as do some community newspapers and news stations. However, some outlets exist entirely online. They can be mainstream media, if they have a significant audience and cover a wide range of news, or they can be more specialized.

Online media, like community media, may be more responsive to ideas from the public and can be easier to access. They often have more room for content than traditional media.

Some online media are structured more like traditional media, with a few differences. The Huffington Post (in Canada and U.S.) is staffed by reporters and editors as well as bloggers. It has a 'news tip' function on its website that lets you send firsthand accounts, information or photos about a news story to its editors. It also has a section dedicated entirely to teens' voices (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/teen/>) which hosts blogs written by high school students and focusses on stories on youth issues. Anyone can pitch a blog idea to the editors through the website.

There are also sites such as Reddit, Gawker, and BuzzFeed which focus on 'social news.' This can include everything from breaking political scandals to funny pictures of cats. These sites allow members to post original content and links to content from around the Web, but often feature site writers more prominently. Reddit arranges its stories by popular vote.

Because of online media's more interactive nature, the writers often respond directly to comments and suggestions from members. The more a member engages with them, the more standing their comments and posts are given. BuzzFeed also directly accepts story ideas and tips for its editors.

As "social news" sources, these sites are better at taking advantage of social media than traditional media. After a 2012 shooting at a block party in Scarborough, a Reddit user used Twitter to reconstruct the entire event, beginning with a tweet announcing the party and ending with promises of retribution. The Reddit thread contained a significant amount of information not available in the mainstream press.<sup>8</sup>

Community media have also moved online. For example, OttawaStart Community is an online newsletter service that posts news and event information for local community groups, businesses and other organizations for free. The service also automatically posts the news to Twitter.

As with mainstream and community media, research different online media and decide which one best suits what you are trying to accomplish.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media give reporters a chance to find you. Reporters will go where the stories are, whether it's city hall or an extremely popular Facebook page. Social media movements are becoming increasingly influential, but they are always most successful when they are combined with traditional media for maximum exposure.

When 20-year-old H el ene Campbell discovered that she needed a double lung transplant in 2011, her story didn't receive a lot of coverage in the press. She started her own website to raise funds for her treatment and general awareness for organ donation. She set up a blog, a Facebook page, a Flickr photostream, a Twitter account and a YouTube channel. After she posted a video asking people to tweet Justin Bieber to help raise awareness, mainstream media picked up the story and she received international coverage. The Ottawa Citizen called a one percent rise in organ donor registrations the 'H el ene Campbell Effect'. The Mayor of Ottawa declared March 30, 2012 H el ene Campbell Day.<sup>9</sup>

Using social media effectively to promote your cause or organization requires preparation and thought. Different strategies work for different sites. For example, on Facebook friends automatically see each others' status updates - making it a good space for organizing a movement or event. Twitter, on the other hand, employs a broadcast model where those followed are not required to follow back and it's possible to follow someone without their permission. As a result, it can be harder to get your message out on Twitter, but if one of your tweets is retweeted by someone with a large number of followers you could reach a much bigger audience than through Facebook.

Global Changemakers' Social Media Toolkit (<http://www.global-changemakers.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/GCMSocialMediaToolkitENG.pdf>) outlines how to structure a social media campaign and how to use the different social media effectively. It provides many real life examples and demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of each platform.



# Being Interviewed

Your efforts have paid off or you're just in the right (or wrong) place at the right time and you've been approached to do an interview. There may be several reasons for this:

- You're the official spokesperson for an organization or event.
- The reporter has asked you to respond to a specific youth-related story because you've developed a good relationship with him/her.
- The reporter wants a "reaction clip" (a five-to ten-second bite) from you that offers an emotional response to a news story.
- The reporter wants a fresh perspective and an honest point of view. (That's attractive to reporters who are used to media-savvy spokespeople who always feed them the same lines.)
- The media want to appear young and hip. By including interviews with young people in their stories, media types hope to attract a broader crowd – including youth.

The information in the following sections will help you learn how to get your message across effectively in an interview, and what your rights are when approached by a reporter. We also look at a fictional case study that shows how being prepared – or not being prepared – can make a difference to the outcome of the story.

## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Some tips to help you prepare for an interview:

### UNDERSTAND WHY YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Find out exactly what the topic and angle of the interview will be. How will the interview be used – for a news story, a current affairs feature or an entertainment piece?

Find out how the interview will be presented to the public. Will the interview be aired live or is it for a pre-recorded segment or an article? How long will the interview be?

### DON'T BE AFRAID TO DO THE INTERVIEW

People often turn down the chance to be interviewed because they're nervous, or afraid they'll say the wrong thing. Instead, think of the interview as a golden opportunity for you to convey your message. If perceptions about you, your school, or youth in general have been wrong in the past, this is your chance to set the record straight.

## **KNOW YOUR RIGHTS**

Remember, you do have a choice about being interviewed. If you're uncomfortable with the idea, you can say no. You can also discuss options with the reporter: you can ask that only your first name be used, you can ask for anonymity, or you can ask to be interviewed off-camera. If the reporter has called to interview you over the phone and you don't feel prepared to talk right away, ask the reporter when you can call him/her back. But don't back out just because you're intimidated. The only way you'll get to be media-savvy is to practice! (For more information, see *Your Rights as an Interviewee*.)

## **THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT YOUR MAIN MESSAGE TO BE**

What is your reason for wanting to speak to the reporter? Think about the main message you want to convey, and how to weave it into every answer you give. That way, even if your answers are cut and spliced during the editing process, your message will still come through. (For more on this, see *Preparing Your Main Message*.)

## **BE PREPARED, BUT NOT OVER-REHEARSED**

If possible, you may be able to participate in a pre-interview. It gives you the chance to think of what you want to say and an idea of what the reporter will be asking before you're asked the questions on-air. Make sure you know your subject inside and out. Write down answers to any questions you think may be asked, but avoid memorizing statements. A successful interview should never appear rehearsed – and reporters dislike prepared statements, because they sound stiff and unnatural. Besides, if you depend on prepared statements you could be thrown off if the reporter asks you an unexpected question.

## **PREPARING YOUR MAIN MESSAGE**

Your main message is the most important information to communicate to your audience. It's the whole reason you

developed a communications plan, gave an interview, or wrote a news release in the first place. Here are some tips on how to make your main message effective:

### **KEEP IT CLEAR**

It's vital that you're clear on exactly what your message is, and why it's urgent to get it across to the public. To identify your core argument, ask yourself: "What do I care most about?" Also ask: "Why should the audience care?"

### **KEEP IT SIMPLE**

Your main message can have several points to it, though it's best to have no more than three. The more points you try to cram in, the harder it will be for your audience to identify them, and the weaker their effect will be. You want each part of your message to be easily identifiable wherever your interview appears.

### **KEEP REPEATING IT**

Weaving your message into everything you do takes practice. In the world of public relations, this is known as spin. (Those who specialize in it are called "spin doctors.") The key is consistency. Decide on two or three main points, and use them – either word-for-word or paraphrased – in all the answers you give, all the news releases you write, all the emails you send. If you can, use facts and figures: these are indisputable, and give credibility to your spin.

For live interviews longer than a minute, you don't want to be as repetitive. Never stray from your main message, but remember to interact with the interviewer and audience. Too much repetition appears stilted and over-rehearsed.

To show how sticking to your main message can make a difference in how a story is reported, see [\*\*\*A Case Study\*\*\*](#).

## DURING THE INTERVIEW

The following tips will help guide you through your interview:

### BE POSITIVE

Try not to appear negative or confrontational. A hostile attitude will make it difficult for viewers to take your point seriously.

### STAY CALM

While emotional outbursts may make good TV, they will make you seem less credible.

### TREAT THE INTERVIEWER WITH RESPECT

Remember that when you speak to a reporter, you're potentially speaking to an audience of hundreds or thousands of people.

### IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER TO A QUESTION, BE HONEST

Say that you don't know, but you'll try to get the information.

Make sure you keep that promise, though – nothing sours a good relationship with a reporter faster than keeping him/her waiting for necessary information.

### SPEAK CLEARLY AND FIRMLY

Offer the reporter just the facts; don't speculate or estimate, even if you're asked to. Don't feel you have to fill "dead air" – that's the interviewer's job. When you've answered a question, stop talking.

### BE HELPFUL

Suggest other sources the reporter could interview. Mention anything that you think might be helpful and offer approaches she/he may not have thought of.

### DON'T WORRY ABOUT REPEATING YOUR MAIN MESSAGE

Your goal is to make sure your message gets across. If that's the only answer you offer the interviewer, then they will have no choice but to use it. Once again, in longer, live interviews repetition to that extent is not recommended.

### DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASSERT YOURSELF

If you're uncomfortable answering a question, just say firmly that you don't think you are the appropriate person to comment. Remember that no reporter has the right to bully you into answering a question if you don't want to. (For more information on what reporters should and shouldn't do, see Your Rights as an Interviewee.)



## TV APPEARANCES

TV interviews are different from those done for print or radio. In TV interviews your appearance can be just as important as your words. Here are some general tips:

- Ask the reporter ahead of time what she plans to ask you. This will give you a chance to think of what you want to say before the cameras start rolling. The location of the interview could reflect on the story, so if you have a choice, suggest a location you're comfortable with.
- Avoid wearing anything that could distract the audience from what you say, such as extremely bright clothing, busy patterns or large jewellery.
- Whether you like it or not, people will judge you on how you look, so try to look professional and tidy. Ask yourself which do you want to stand more: your appearance or your words?
- Always maintain eye contact with the person you're speaking to. This could be one reporter, several reporters, or a studio audience. But avoid looking at the camera – just pretend it's not there.
- Speak in short, concise sentences. If you answer reporters clearly, they're less likely to edit your statements – and maybe cut out important points. Remember, the average interview clip in a news story is only seven to 15 seconds!
- Sit still or stand still. Try not to fidget in front of the camera – small movements such as nail biting or foot tapping are magnified on screen. Sit with your hands folded in your lap and both feet planted on the ground. No swivel chairs or rocking chairs!



## YOUR RIGHTS AS AN INTERVIEWEE

If someone in the media approaches you for an interview, it's important to understand your rights.

Journalists are bound by federal and provincial laws on privacy, trespassing and defamation.

They also have to follow a set of journalistic codes. For instance, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) (<http://www.cbsc.ca/english/codes/index.php>) and the Radio and Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) (<http://www.rtndacanada.com/ETHICS/codeofethics.asp>) have developed industry codes of ethics to deal with disputes and complaints. As well, media outlets may have their own formal or informal rules for reporters to follow.

This section outlines what your rights are according to the law, and according to common journalistic standards. It also clarifies what your options are when the law doesn't protect you, and what to do if you feel your rights are violated.

# Permission and Consent

There is currently no law requiring media to seek the permission of parents or school authorities before interviewing children and young people. If you speak to a reporter, and you know you're speaking to him or her for publication or broadcast, that's all the consent required.



There are, however, laws governing trespassing. If a reporter comes to your high school and asks you for an interview, you can decline. If the reporter persists, your principal could ask the reporter to leave the school property. If the reporter refuses to leave, she/he can be charged with trespassing.

No law requires a photographer to get permission to photograph a person – even a very young person. However, it is the practice of most media to ask for the parents' permission when photographing children.

To protect themselves, many reporters will ask you to sign a release form or waiver, saying you've agreed to be interviewed.

According to Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission regulations, a reporter must ask your permission before broadcasting a telephone interview with you – whether it's live or recorded. However, consent is not needed if you phone the station to participate in a phone-in talk-show type of broadcast.

Consent is also not required for any material you have posted publically online. Social media are a great way to connect with reporters and to create stories. However, reporters can also use them to investigate and do research for a story.

If you become a part of the story, your online presence will be a part of what they research. It has become common practice for reporters to pull photographs and quotes from Facebook for stories.<sup>10</sup> The first youth police commissioner in the United Kingdom was forced to resign when controversial tweets she had posted from the ages of 14 to 16 were reported in media.<sup>11</sup>

If your privacy settings are properly set, reporters are not supposed to access the information unethically. However, information on the Internet has a way of sticking around and getting out. Try to be responsible with what you post online: see the MediaSmarts tip sheet Building Your Online Brand ([http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/tipsheet/TipSheet\\_BuildingYourBrand.pdf](http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/tipsheet/TipSheet_BuildingYourBrand.pdf)) for more details.

## DISCLOSURE OF IDENTITY

Reporters should identify themselves as such, and state their purpose in speaking to you. While the law doesn't require reporters to disclose their occupation, it's generally considered ethical and professional to do this.

You never, ever, have to give an interview to a reporter. You always have the right to decline. If you have something to say but want to protect your identity, you can ask for your name to be left out, to be interviewed off-camera, or to have your voice or appearance altered.

## SLANDER AND DEFAMATION

You have to be careful what you say in an interview. While the Charter of Rights protects freedom of expression, making statements that could cause harm to others is against the law. For instance, claiming that a fellow student was involved in a violent fight when you didn't witness it yourself could be a defamatory statement (meaning it's untrue and could hurt the person's reputation): the student could sue you, the reporter, and the media outlet.

When you post something online, such as on Twitter or Facebook, you are legally considered its publisher. This means that you can be held responsible for the material if it is found to be defamatory or threatening. In Montreal, a woman was accused of criminal harassment for posting a picture of graffiti on Instagram that featured a police officer being shot in the head.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly, people are being sued for comments made on Twitter and online message boards.

Even when a statement is not defamatory, it is important to remember how easily a written statement can be taken out of context. Without the dozens of non-verbal clues, such as tone and body language, that we get when talking to someone in person,

it's easy for someone to misinterpret or misunderstand a written statement. It is also extremely easy to take a single tweet or status update out of context.

Revealing something sensitive to a reporter "off-the-record" is not a good idea. It's generally considered unethical for reporters to publish such statements – but ethics are voluntary guidelines, and no law protects off-the-record comments. Unless you're sure the reporter is trustworthy, avoid making such statements.

## COPYRIGHT

When you post pictures, videos and other content that does not belong to you, you have to be mindful of the law. This is particularly important for a Facebook page or Twitter account that is actively promoting a cause or organization, especially when collecting funds, as it could be considered a commercial undertaking.

The federal Copyright Act governs copyright in Canada. It protects all intellectual property, which can include anything from paintings to poems to television shows. Usually, you cannot use someone else's property without permission or a licence, but there are some exemptions, called Fair Dealing, which allow limited use of materials under specific circumstances. News reporting, which includes news blogging, is one notable exemption. Parody, satire and education are other important exemptions.

In all cases, you should always properly credit the original author, maker, performer or broadcaster. If in doubt, don't post someone else's content.

**For more information, see the Intellectual Property section of MediaSmarts' website (<http://mediasmarts.ca/intellectual-property>).**

## FILING A COMPLAINT

If you feel your rights have been violated during an interview, or that you were misrepresented in a news story, there are ways to get redress:

1. Outline your concerns in a letter to the media outlet. (For help, see [How to Write an Effective Comment Letter](#).) Address the letter to the news editor of the station, newspaper or other news outlet, as well as to the newspaper's "Letters to the Editor" page.
2. If you don't get a satisfactory reply within a week, your next step would be to contact the organizations that regulate media. Broadcast and print media both have established systems to respond to such concerns. The Canadian Association of Broadcasters created the Canadian Broadcasting Standards Council (<http://www.cbsc.ca/english/>) to respond to public complaints about television and radio content. There are also regional press councils (<http://www.newspaperscanada.ca/about - newspapers/press - complaints>) across Canada to handle public complaints about newspaper coverage.
3. You may also want to send a copy of your letter to an elected official, such as your city councillor, regional representative, MPP or MLA, or your Member of Parliament (MP). Remember that letters addressed to federal MPs do not require a postage stamp.

What should you expect from media organizations if they have made a mistake? It is important to remember that owning up to a mistake in print or on air is a big deal for journalists. A published retraction is a significant gesture.



# A Case Study

## LEALOCK SECONDARY SCHOOL STABBING INCIDENT

The following case study is based on a fictitious stabbing incident at an imaginary high school. The morning after a violent incident there, a reporter is sent to Lealock Secondary School to interview a student. The story angle she plans to take is “Youth violence is out of control and on the rise in local schools.”

The principal asks Mike, a member of the student council, to meet the reporter at school later that afternoon. The interview lasts only five minutes.

### MIKE IS UNPREPARED: THE INTERVIEW AND THE RESULTING NEWS STORY

Mike is still shaken up from the stabbing incident that happened at his school the day before. He has heard lots of rumours about what happened, but he knows nothing that has been confirmed. He feels unprepared for the interview, but he doesn't think it will matter as long as he answers questions honestly.

### THIS IS HOW THE INTERVIEW GOES:

**Reporter:** School violence seems to be increasing in our community. How many attacks like this have happened in the past few years at this school?

**Mike:** I don't know.

**Reporter:** But would you agree that school violence is on the rise?

**Mike:** Yeah, I guess so. I've heard some stories of stabbings and shootings around town. I guess bringing a knife to school is becoming an everyday thing.

**Reporter:** What's the mood like around here? Were you afraid to come to school today?

**Mike:** No. I mean, it's not like someone gets stabbed at school every day. But I know some people are pretty freaked out by the whole thing. I guess it just depends on the person.

**Reporter:** A couple of people have told me that this incident was racially motivated. What's the consensus?

**Mike:** From what I've heard, I'd say, yeah, it probably was a race thing. A couple of my friends saw the whole thing and they say this one black kid went after this native kid and then the native kid pulled out a knife.

**Reporter:** Is there a lot of racial tension at your school?

**Mike:** At my school? Fights at our school can be about anything—the colour of your skin, the kind of music you listen to, the people you date... I think some people at our school would pick a fight over

the colour of your socks. But no, I don't think you'd find any more fighting at our school than you would at any other local high school.

**Reporter:** Thanks for your time.

### HERE'S HOW THE REPORTER DECIDED TO USE MIKE'S INTERVIEW IN HER STORY:

#### STUDENT CALLS STABBING "EVERYDAY THING"

By Jane Smith

Yesterday's violent stabbing incident at Lealock Secondary School left many students shaken. Several students witnessed a racially-motivated fight break out in a school hallway that involved two eleventh - grade students at Lealock. While the stabbing has left many students shell-shocked and many parents concerned, Lealock student Mike Peters says such violence is becoming commonplace.

"I guess bringing a knife to school is becoming an everyday thing," he said, the afternoon after the stabbing. According to Peters, violent incidents such as yesterday's stabbing are on the increase, as angry teens look for any excuse to throw the first punch. "Fights at our school can be about anything—the colour of your skin, the kind of music you listen to, the people you date," says Peters. "I think some people at our school would pick a fight over the colour of your socks."

Dr. Wilson Fellows, a psychiatrist who works with dangerous kids, says school violence is on the increase. He says kids today often turn to fighting to solve their problems...

Now check out how this story could have turned out if Mike had been prepared for the interview.



### MIKE IS IN CONTROL: THE INTERVIEW AND THE RESULTING NEWS STORY

When the principal asks Mike to speak to the reporter, Mike first asks the principal for any additional information the principal thinks the reporter may ask for—such as how common this type of incident is at Lealock and what is being done about it.

Before meeting the reporter, Mike takes five minutes to clarify the key points he wants to make during his interview:

- Violent incidents, such as the one that happened yesterday, are very rare at our school. According to our principal, Dr. Kang, this is the first time one of our students has ever been attacked with a weapon on school grounds.
- Our student council has begun to work with the administration to hold counselling sessions for the students who witnessed the incident and conflict resolution workshops to help students to deal with violence.
- We don't know what motivated the attack. The attack is still under investigation by the school.

Mike also thinks about what questions the reporter may ask, and what answers he may give. When he meets the reporter that afternoon, Mike tries to keep his main message—that the school is not a dangerous place—firmly in mind.

**Reporter:** School violence seems to be increasing in our community, wouldn't you agree?

**Mike:** I'm not so sure. I'm probably not the best person to answer that question.

**Reporter:** But wouldn't you agree that school violence is indeed on the increase at your own school?

**Mike:** Our school hasn't seen a lot of violence, actually. This is the first time a student has ever been attacked with a weapon on school grounds.

**Reporter:** What's the mood like around here? Were you afraid to come to school today?

**Mike:** Both our student council and the administration have been working closely since yesterday afternoon. We've organized counselling sessions for students who witnessed the incident. We're also organizing a couple of conflict resolution workshops on violence for all students.

**Reporter:** Are the workshops and counseling sessions common practice at your school?

**Mike:** We just want to make sure that everyone is alright, and that this type of thing doesn't happen again. Violent incidents at our school are very rare, and we want to keep it that way.

**Reporter:** A couple of people have told me that this incident was racially motivated. What's the consensus?

**Mike:** The school is still investigating the matter, and right now no one is really sure why it happened.

**Reporter:** Thanks for your time.

As you can see from this interview, Mike managed to weave all his main points into the four answers he gave. When the reporter tried to get Mike to agree that youth violence was on the rise in his school and in the community, Mike refused to speculate on youth

violence in general but he communicated that this kind of incident was rare in his school. When asked "Were you afraid to come to school today?" he talked about the positive steps the school and students were taking in response to the incidence. When asked if the incident was racially motivated, Mike reinforced his main message that no one knew the motivation behind the incident, and he offered information instead of speculation.

### HERE'S HOW THE REPORTER TREATED MIKE'S INTERVIEW:

#### HIGH SCHOOL COPES AFTER UNUSUAL VIOLENCE

By Jane Smith

Students at Lealock Secondary School are still reeling from a stabbing incident that happened yesterday afternoon. Several students witnessed one student assaulting another with a knife in a school hallway. The school is still investigating the incident.

According to Lealock student Mike Peters, such violence is rare—yesterday's attack was the first time a Lealock student had ever been attacked with a weapon at the school.

The student council and the school administration were quick to respond, offering counselling sessions for those who witnessed the incident. Peters says the school is also organizing a series of conflict resolution workshops on violence.

"We just want to make sure everyone is alright," says Peters. "Violent incidents at our school are very rare, and we want to keep it that way."

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