

How to Move Your Messages in the Media

Start Thinking About Media Now

Why wait until the last minute to factor media into your plans for the National Weekend of Faith in Action (NWFA)? As soon as you decide that you are going to organize an event, make media coverage an integral part of your overall strategy. We encourage you to think of your work to abolish the death penalty as a campaign. Every time you talk about abolition, write a letter to the editor, submit an op-ed, or arrange a forum at your church or school, it's an opportunity to build support for your "candidate": abolition. In order to build that support, however, you must be prepared to deal strategically with the media and the public. As soon as you start planning your NWFA activities, start thinking of ways to use the media as a tool to generate support for your messages.

MEDIA ADVISORIES

Use media advisories to announce your event and provide relevant details (who-what-when-where-why). A media advisory may also contain a key message along with a quote stating AI's position on the death penalty. It should be sent to all relevant local media by fax or e-mail ideally no later than one week before the event, but at least two or three days in advance. Follow up with a phone call one to two days before the event, and perhaps again the day of the event as a reminder. Be prepared to resend the advisory to those who say they have not received it. Also be prepared to explain the event in a simple and concise way over the phone. Keep your conversation with journalists brief and courteous at all times - they are often on deadline and might not have time to speak with you; inquire when you should call back. It is always best to have the name of the person you want to send it to beforehand. Ask to speak to him/her when you follow up with phone calls. Obtain e-mail addresses whenever possible, so that you have multiple ways of contacting journalists.

You can contact the media about vigils, demonstrations, guest speakers, protests, art shows, or any other kind of National Weekend of Faith in Action event, and many other activities related to your abolition work. See the sample NWFA Media Advisory.

GETTING THE MEDIA TO COVER YOUR EVENT

All events are opportunities for media exposure. Here are some ideas to keep in mind when organizing an event, followed by some practical tips for the event itself:

- **Daybook.** The Associated Press has a bureau in most towns throughout the US and should be listed in your phonebook. Call and ask if they can list your event in the "daybook." This is a calendar that local journalists read in order to learn of upcoming events. The most effective way to utilize the daybook is to write a media advisory and fax it to the local Associated Press and any other local media. You should notify the media at least 48 hours before your event if possible.
- **Timing.** Weekends, although usually the best time for groups, are often a difficult time for newspapers and radio stations. Also, as many weekly newspapers go to print on a Monday or Tuesday, it can often be difficult for them to cover a weekend event. For these reasons, you might consider organizing your NWFA event on Friday evening.

- **Photos.** Take photographs at your event and submit them within 48 hours to your weekly paper. More and more papers accept photos electronically. Make sure to label each photograph in the e-mail when you submit it. Strong visual events could also interest local television - new and creative ideas are always worth trying.
- **Banners.** Use banners or posters with your group's name clearly written on them at your event. Bystanders will be able identify you and, if a picture is published, it will indicate the organizer of the event.
- **Celebrities and Experts.** The participation of local politicians, actors, sports figures, musicians, and others in the public eye can increase interest in an event. And an expert speaker can often be a draw for an event as well. We encourage you to develop a list of local speakers on the death penalty, including murder victims' family members, exonerated death row inmates, attorneys, faith leaders, etc.

Media Is a Tool

When most people think of media, they think of television, radio, and newspapers; however, these outlets are simply vehicles. Real media is the content and the messages delivered to the general public through these vehicles. You, too, can use media as a tool to present your messages in compelling and persuasive ways. Television, radio and newspapers are all tools that activists can use to close the gap between public support for the death penalty and the harsh realities of this antiquated practice. Think about it this way - when was the last time you listened to a radio talk show, or read an opinion column, op-ed or letter to the editor that did not try to convey a specific point of view about a certain issue? The outlets are the vehicle, but it's the messages that provide the content and drive public opinion.

Agenda Moving Messages

Successful media is based on strong, dynamic messaging. One political insider refers to messaging as the "story by which we communicate." It conveys the key points you want the public to understand about your issue. As you develop your events or activities for the NWFA, think about what you want people to learn about the death penalty and abolition, or about the Weekend itself. Think about your audience. Will your messages resonate with this group? Think of interesting ways to make your core messages about the death penalty more compelling and appropriate for your community. For example, try statements like "an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind," or "two wrongs don't make a right." You might also consider promoting your faith tradition's position on the death penalty. Just remember to ALWAYS stick to the core messages.

Keep in mind that one of the primary goals of your speech, letter, op-ed, or interview is to make others reflect on their own beliefs about the death penalty. Sure, our friends and allies might agree with us, but preaching to the choir is no longer enough. If we are going to be successful in our efforts to abolish the death penalty, we must fill the pews with new faces. The NWFA itself is designed to create a safe space for those with deeply held religious convictions to come together and talk about the death penalty. Make sure you talk about abolition in ways that are true to your values, but don't be afraid to extend a friendly hand to a person or group to whom you otherwise would not reach out. You may be surprised at how many more people are willing to listen to what you have to say.

Putting It All Together

Ideally, you will start to think about ways to integrate media into whatever events you plan for NWFA. You might also make outreach to the media the cornerstone of your participation in the NWFA. As you plan your event, consider your target audience. Develop messages relevant to your event and audience, and then, if appropriate, take them to the public.

While speeches, meetings, and community discussions may not bring out newspapers or television cameras, they are great opportunities to interact with people who may not support abolishing the death penalty. The forethought you put into developing your messages will come in handy here. These key points, presented in a very compelling way, could persuade at least one person to see how fundamentally and morally wrong the death penalty is.

Newspapers

There are a number of ways to generate media coverage in newspapers. This includes alternative, African-American, and Latino weekly papers, or any other type of community bulletin.

1. Earned media:

This includes stories, columns and other items written by reporters or columnists at the paper. Contact religion reporters or columnists who are supportive of abolishing the death penalty and talk to them about NWFA. You can also “pitch” or try to convince a reporter to cover your event or your participation in the NWFA. For example, in 2003, prominent religious leaders in Ohio signed a letter calling on Governor Bob Taft to declare a moratorium on executions in Ohio, in what they hope will be the first step toward ending the state's death penalty. Multiple news outlets picked up the story.

2. Op-eds:

Write a column for your local newspaper discussing the NWFA and demonstrating that people of faith oppose capital punishment. Try to tie it to current events. Be direct and to the point. Use information that localizes the column. These pieces are usually 500-700 words, but check the submission guidelines for your paper to be sure. (Guidelines can usually be found on the paper's website.) You can also offer to write a piece for a member of the clergy at your church and submit it in that person's name (with their permission, of course!).

3. Letters to the Editor:

These are usually written in response to a story, editorial, or something else that was published recently in the newspaper. Letters to the editor tend to be about 250 words. Be sure to reference the story to which your letter relates. Again, check the newspaper's website for specific guidelines. Amnesty International USA's Program to Abolish the Death Penalty can provide you with sample letters to the editor, talking points, etc.

Radio

Write a letter or make a call to the producers of a radio talk show in your community, suggesting that they focus a show or a segment of a show on the NWFA. Offer to appear on the show - perhaps with a prominent community faith leader - to discuss such topics as a death penalty case in your state, moratorium legislation, or recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions. The best shows to approach are religious programs on AM stations, gospel radio stations, college radio, or the local NPR or Pacifica affiliate. Again, consider radio stations or programs that are popular in African-American or Spanish-speaking communities. Just do a little research on the radio show beforehand, to make sure that you are not walking into a combative radio format or anything else with which you might be uncomfortable.

Television

When planning your event, ask yourself if you are doing anything that would make for "good television." "Good television" is a term that refers to active, lively, colorful events that will convince a news department to send a camera crew. Be sure to send the assignment desk editor at the television station a notice about your event. Then, a day or two before the event, call to follow up. (Usually, television stations don't commit to covering an event until the last minute, so don't feel slighted if it seems like they are dismissing you.)

You might also consider contacting the heads of your public access TV station, to suggest that they produce a show on the NWFA, featuring representatives of various religious perspectives on the death penalty.

Online

Opportunities to communicate your messages online have grown considerably over the last few years. Most local papers now have websites that provide a link at the bottom of stories, which allows readers to submit their opinions. Check out your local newspaper's website and look for opportunities to promote your NWFA activities or events.

Blogging

Visit one of the following death penalty blogs - or start your own! There are many personal, local group, and state coalition blogs run by activists throughout the United States. There are also several national blogs. Read and comment on these often to build involvement from the growing online community; you can also use these blogs to discuss your plans for the NWFA and why it's critical for faith communities to take action on the death penalty issue:

- Amnesty International USA's Death Penalty Blog: <http://blogs.amnestyusa.org/death-penalty>
- Abolish the Death Penalty, NCADP: www.deathpenaltyusa.blogspot.com
- Against Death Rows: www.againstdeathrows.blogspot.com
- Capital Defense Weekly: <http://capitaldefenseweekly.com>
- Journey of Hope: www.thejourneyofhope.blogspot.com
- The Lonely Abolitionist: www.lonelyabolitionist.blogspot.com
- TCASK :: On the Road (to Abolition): <http://tcask.blogspot.com>

With your own death penalty blog, you can share your thoughts, personal experiences, interesting news stories, or favorite websites; you can also link to other blogs. There are several websites that offer free blogs, including:

- www.blogger.com
- www.typepad.com
- www.blogstream.com

Guidelines

The following guidelines have been adapted from the *AIUSA Activist Toolkit 2002-2003* and are helpful pointers in dealing with the media.

- Keep it simple. Whether it's a telephone call, a media advisory or an event, always try to focus on your basic messages on the death penalty. Repeat what you want to see in the paper rather than improvising under pressure.
- Localize. Local journalists look for a local angle - stress to them that you are part of a larger effort involving hundreds of faith communities throughout the country.
- React. If you read a story in your local paper that relates - or could relate - to the death penalty, call the reporter who wrote the story and talk to him or her about your work in this area. You may also want to write a letter to the editor.
- Contact. Keep a record of contacts you make at local newspapers and radio stations and note any journalists who seem particularly interested in this issue - you will want to contact them again when you hold other events.