

SEMINARS

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Media and Communication Skills



The Role and Power of the Mass Media

Rami G. Khouri

Our world today is increasingly driven by a combination of information and entertainment values, and these are both promoted by the explosion of different means of communication, especially electronic communication such as satellite TV and Internet. This means the market for information is extremely competitive and is characterized by the following:

1. *Overload on the audience:* Most people today, even in many developing countries, have access to scores of information sources in their homes and offices, including television, radio, internet and others. The audience is over-loaded with options, so if you want to catch someone's attention via the mass media you have to produce quality material that is deemed appropriate to use by journalists and deemed worth reading or viewing by the audience.
2. *Overload on the mass media:* Most journalists are flooded with sources of information, press releases, story ideas and requests for coverage. This means that if you want to attract a journalist's or editor's attention and get coverage in their publication or on their channel, you have to produce quality information and PR materials that are credible and that catch the press's attention.
3. *Overload on funders and advertisers:* Those people who pay money to the mass media or to non-governmental organizations - advertisers and funders - are also flooded with more requests than they can meet. So it is critically important for NGOs today to produce high quality work if they wish to attract funds from donors or support from companies that have the option to spend their money on direct advertising and promotion.

In view of the above, it is important for NGOs and others who wish to use the mass media and other mass-comm channels to stress quality and professionalism in the work they do, especially in their information/promotion work. The use of quality, professional materials and techniques will generate an audience for you, which in turn means credibility, financial support, capacity to influence public opinion or public actions, and thus power to change society for the better. (However, some groups in society, especially private firms, shun the mass media and public exposure, and prefer to work quietly. Others use the mass media in a negative way, mainly to prevent the public from having negative views of them or their work. These are both valid options, but most NGOs do not fall into this category, and instead want to use mass-comm channels to generate publicity, goodwill, funding and support.)

The Palestinian and Wider Contexts

NGOs and others in Palestine who wish to use mass-comm channels to achieve their goals have to recognize the four overlapping contexts in which they operate: the Palestinian, Israeli, Arab and global contexts. Each is characterized by different realities, and needs different technical and political approaches.

The fact is that the Palestine issue remains a major global issue, often in the news and attracting the attention of governments and top world leaders on a routine basis. This means that you have the potential to use the high visibility of the Palestine issue to attract the attention and support of many audiences around the region and the world. However, at the same time there is a general perception around the world that the Palestine issue is on the way to being resolved through the Oslo Accords. This means that many potential supporters might lose interest and move their focus to other areas of the world. The result of this situation is that Palestinian organizations have to work harder to use mass-comm and other channels to maintain worldwide interest in our issue, and to stress that there is greater than ever need for international support for Palestinian NGOs because of the peculiar situation created by the peace-making process.

Using the mass media and communication channels in the four contexts mentioned above requires a clear understanding of each one, and how it works within its own political culture and national values. The Palestinian mass-comm sector is fragmented, very local in its orientation, highly personalized, and also both traditional and very new. The Israeli sector is highly political and commercial, with few personal dimensions. The Arab sector is a combination of two very different extremes: tightly controlled national institutions that mainly reflect the official views, and free-market and entertainment-based private media channels that reflect a combination of state and private views.

The world mass-comm sector is global, market-driven, and increasingly based on entertainment values, even in the news business. These four very different contexts require different approaches, and each can serve a very different purpose. Palestinian NGOs seeking mass-comm coverage must first identify their target audience and the intended results they wish to

achieve, and then decide which channels best meet those aims. Goals will differ widely, from NGOs that seek funding and members, to NGOs that want to educate families and students, to private firms that want to sell their products, to cultural groups that want to promote social values, to government institutions that want to project a policy line or political viewpoint.

In order to make best use of the different mass media channels, you should keep in mind what the media themselves see as their primary role, which differs in the above cases. In general, the role of the mass media in global society has been evolving over the past century towards the following goals and duties:

1. The media informs the public, provides information and amusement, generates political ideas, mobilizes political and social action groups, and generally helps to shape the public policy agenda and priorities.
2. The media plays a role of political accountability and checks-and-balances, keeping an eye on public officials and institutions and constantly challenging them via reports, interviews, debates, etc.
3. The media can sometimes play the role of a direct political actor, such as happened in the Watergate or Monica Lewinsky cases in the United States, when revelations by the press sparked political crises and legal actions, or as happens in the Middle East sometimes when the press reveals political actions or plans that impact on the political scene.
4. The mass media also plays an accountability role *vis-à-vis* the private sector and NGOs, reporting on their activities and making sure that they do not harm the public wellbeing. In view of the above realities, it is important to be able to make use of mass-comm channels effectively but without exaggerating the power of the mass media. In the end, the media is a reflection of society. Very rarely can the mass media actually make people change their minds or their views instantly.

The media primarily reinforce existing views that people hold. This means that you should carefully define what goal you wish to achieve through the mass media. Usually this goal will be primarily informational - i.e., you will want to inform people and give them facts or information about your work or your cause. You should not expect the media to bring about major or rapid changes in public attitudes. The media is best used to provide factual information in a steady, credible manner, and that knowledge over time helps to change people's attitudes.

NGOs often use the media without precise goals or targets. Often people send press releases or hold press conferences without having sufficiently 'newsy' information to give the press, and this results in poor coverage, or even in situations where some journalists do not respond the next time they are approached by the same NGO. It is important to have a clear, realistic aim when you use the mass media, such as: specific facts to be disseminated, a project announced, an appeal for money or support, introducing a new person or activity, etc. If you do not have newsworthy information, you should not try to use the media to spread your message via free news coverage, but instead use paid advertising or other channels of communication.

Finally, the impact of the mass media should be monitored, so that you can determine what kind of and how much impact the media has on people and society. It might prove more useful for your organizational goals to use other communication means, such as religious, social or tribal groups, the school system, political parties, the government agencies, or other NGOs.