

Talking to the Media

Avoiding the Pitfalls: A Guide for Anarchists

CrimethInc.

12th December 2017

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Anarchists have appeared in the corporate media a lot this year, from the first breathless reports on resistance to the rise of the far right to recent appearances in the fashion pages. But not all visibility is good visibility. The Trump regime is looking to popularize an image of anarchists and other activists as a major threat to public order in order to legitimize further crackdowns; fascist organizations have worked hard to capitalize on a media profile of “antifa” as violent and mysterious in order to draw more people into their ranks. Corporate media outlets like the *Wall Street Journal* are notorious for catering to the reactionary politics of their owners, while even the most sympathetic media coverage can be useful to law enforcement agencies seeking information to use against activists.

Anarchists and others have long been critical of the function of the media itself. Yet it’s not always possible to avoid press coverage; in the information age, it’s spin or be spun. When we act effectively in pursuit of social change, media outlets will seek to represent us to the general public—and unless we can disrupt their narratives, most people will see us through their eyes.

Corporate media is not a neutral space in which we can present ideas the way we can in direct conversation with our coworkers and neighbors. It is a strategic terrain on which the authorities position themselves to legitimate the use of force. To step in front of the cameras is to enter a hostile territory controlled by a class that is determined to use our images against us. If we enable media outlets to depict us as violent, alien, or extreme—no matter how strong the arguments we make in favor of our tactics or ideas—the ultimate result will be that the authorities are emboldened to step up their attacks on us.

When we engage with the media, we must not imagine that they will promote our ideas; we have to accomplish that on our own through our own channels. (At best, we can use media appearances to direct people to those channels, like the organization that insisted on only answering interviews in front of a banner displaying their website.) Rather, we are engaging in a subtle war of position in which we seek to prevent the authorities from alienating others from us and to undermine the narratives that legitimize their violence. We must always balance the possible gains to be made in legitimacy and visibility against the risks of making ourselves a higher profile target.

We should never forget the example of the SHAC campaign, which sought to shut down an animal testing company. At first, the campaign made great headway, gaining momentum as the media publicized the effects of their organizing—yet ultimately, law enforcement was able to use this menacing image to orchestrate a crackdown that sent many people to prison for years. We offer the following suggestions in hopes of helping you navigate your interactions with the media safely.

Before Talking with the Media:

- Consider whether there is another person or group better positioned to make public statements on a subject. Consult others who may be affected by what you say to get their feedback before participating in an interview.
- Consider how you will be viewed by the reporters, the editors, and their audience. Are you the best person to convey this information?

- Consider the risks to activists currently facing criminal charges or others who might face them in the future. Even the most innocuous statements can be manipulated to smear and discredit activists, especially those already facing criminal charges. Everything said in a press interview can be used:
 1. in criminal prosecutions
 2. to indict the person being interviewed or anyone else implicated in the public statements
 3. to subpoena the person being interviewed to testify for the prosecution and against his or her comrades and fellow activists.
- Establish clearly defined goals in advance. What specific gain do you stand to accomplish by appearing in this media outlet? How will you accomplish it? For example, if you are attempting to draw additional participants to an upcoming demonstration, it may make sense to obtain coverage in a paper read by people who may join you, but it probably will not make sense to appear in a paper read chiefly by reactionaries who wish to see such protests suppressed.
- Compose your talking points and practice presenting them concisely. Reporters will often ask leading or hostile questions in order to trap you into providing the material they need to tell a predetermined story. If you have limited experience with the media, speak to those who have more experience.
- Identify the agenda of the outlet you will be speaking to. What do *they* hope to accomplish? What are the basic terms of the discourse that they utilize? How can you disrupt the narratives that they are propagating?
- What leverage do you have on this reporter? What leverage do you have on the venue in which the story will appear? If you have no basis for trust, be very cautious.

When you speak with reporters, make agreements in advance about how they will identify you and what information they will publish. Emphasize that you do not represent a political constituency and are not acting as a “leader for the movement.” If you use a pseudonym, be careful to ensure that no one will be able to work out your legal identity; law enforcement officers have compelled journalists to reveal the “true identities” of media spokespersons as a way of endangering and discrediting them.

Advice to Activists from a Sympathetic Reporter

This originally appeared in the fourth issue of Rolling Thunder as part of “Report from the Press Box: MSM Confidential.” If some of it contradicts the above advice, take it with a grain of salt.

- Be direct at all times. The person with the tape recorder considers you suspect. He believes you have fallen victim to an intellectual trap of your own making: an inability to appreciate nuance or identify with your enemy. As he sees it, his job on this unfortunate assignment is to present your information without getting suckered into mainlining lefty propaganda

into the information bloodstream. He will ask you many, many questions (Who is funding this organization? Isn't it true that you are all college graduates? Did you ever consider taking your grievances to the Community Police Board? Can I see your membership lists?); you should answer them in full, where appropriate. It's more important to be upfront if your enterprise is loosely coordinated than to present yourself as a stable coalition or single entity when that's not the case. No one likes to be interrogated, but it's better for you if he feels that you've held nothing back from him.

- If you challenge her, don't back her into a corner. Journalists don't like to be reminded that we don't know everything in the world. (You might think that the beginning of journalism is a recognition of that basic fact, but there you have it.) As a result, spewing jargon or citing obscure texts will make her feel ignorant, exposed, and angry. She will portray you as aloof elitists playacting at something important. If she draws an improper conclusion during your conversation, it's far better to clarify what you've said than to jump down her throat. If she continues to misrepresent you, call her office after the story is published, and warn her editor that there's a fabulist on staff. (Remember that word—"fabulist," that is to say, liar. Those three syllables make editors break out in a cold sweat.)
- Don't insult his intelligence. It's not that this reporter isn't intelligent. Rare is the reporter who doesn't exhibit at least basic intelligence, since his job depends on either inquiry or diligence. Flattery will get you nowhere, since he doesn't like to be bullshitted. But politeness and attentiveness are appreciated in what is very often an exhausting job for little pay. If you treat him with respect and openness, he may even reconsider his condescension. Don't bet on it, but stranger things have happened.
- Be extremely concrete. She wants facts. You want things to change. During your interview, explain in detail what you intend to do, how, and why. If this involves illegal activity, describe the motivations for your actions very clearly. Don't expect all this raw information to make it into the story. But the more you give her, the more she will have to fill up her column inches or her word count or her airtime—and all of that will come from your side. Remember, you are giving her access. The IMF or the local police precinct will not. That is an advantage to you.
- Remain accessible. I have never written a story for which I had no further questions to ask when I sat down in front of my keyboard. The reporter you're dealing with will probably want to ask some follow-up questions. If you're not around to answer them, he is going to make inferences and assumptions about what you're about. If you complain to his editors, he'll be able to argue, credibly, that you weren't answering your phone or your email, and he had a deadline to meet, so what else could he do. He will win that argument. Don't let him.
- Have extremely low expectations. Remember, you are a carnival freak for Homo Journalisticus. Her inclination is to print only as much of your story as is necessary for her to get back to the office and put in for a more interesting assignment. This is as true—if not more so—for young reporters than older ones: the young reporter is clocking time until a better job or a better bureau opens up, and your penny-ante revolutionary antics are the tick of her clock. Following the above instructions will get your message out inasmuch as that is

possible through this medium. You may, of course, choose to supplement your efforts in the mainstream press with your own account on a website or elsewhere, but that's your domain and not mine.

- Find out who his editor is. This is cunning, and it pays off. Ask him what desk he's on (Metro? General assignment? National?), who he works for, how long he's been there, and how he finds it. Take notes. He'll interpret this as a sign of your diligence as a press liaison, and, at best, a polite recognition of his importance. In reality, this is a tool to use for your advantage. If you are dissatisfied with his coverage, contact his editor and itemize your grievances. Some caveats: do not rant, and be prepared to be specific about errors of fact or sloppiness. It is in this area that the editor on the other end of the phone or e-mail will be prepared to act—either by running corrections, assigning another reporter to cover you and putting him on a leash, or by actively punishing your malicious interlocutor. If you try to correct interpretation, the editor will consider you a crank and stick up for the reporter.

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