

## Chapter 7 Reaching Your Audience Through the Media

- Audience
- Printed media
- Electronic media
- Press releases
- Press conferences
- PSAs

One of the best ways to reach the public at large is to get your message out through newspapers, radio, and television. These media are especially important where a study has found safety, health, or environmental problems that need to be shared with the public. Including data in press releases, public service announcements, or interviews gives study findings factual credibility.

### Audience

There is less concern for targeting audiences in drafting media materials than there is in writing brochures or reports, because final control over the material lies with the media. Materials may be edited for length as well as style. However, since the audience is broad, the information and message should be kept simple and easy to understand.

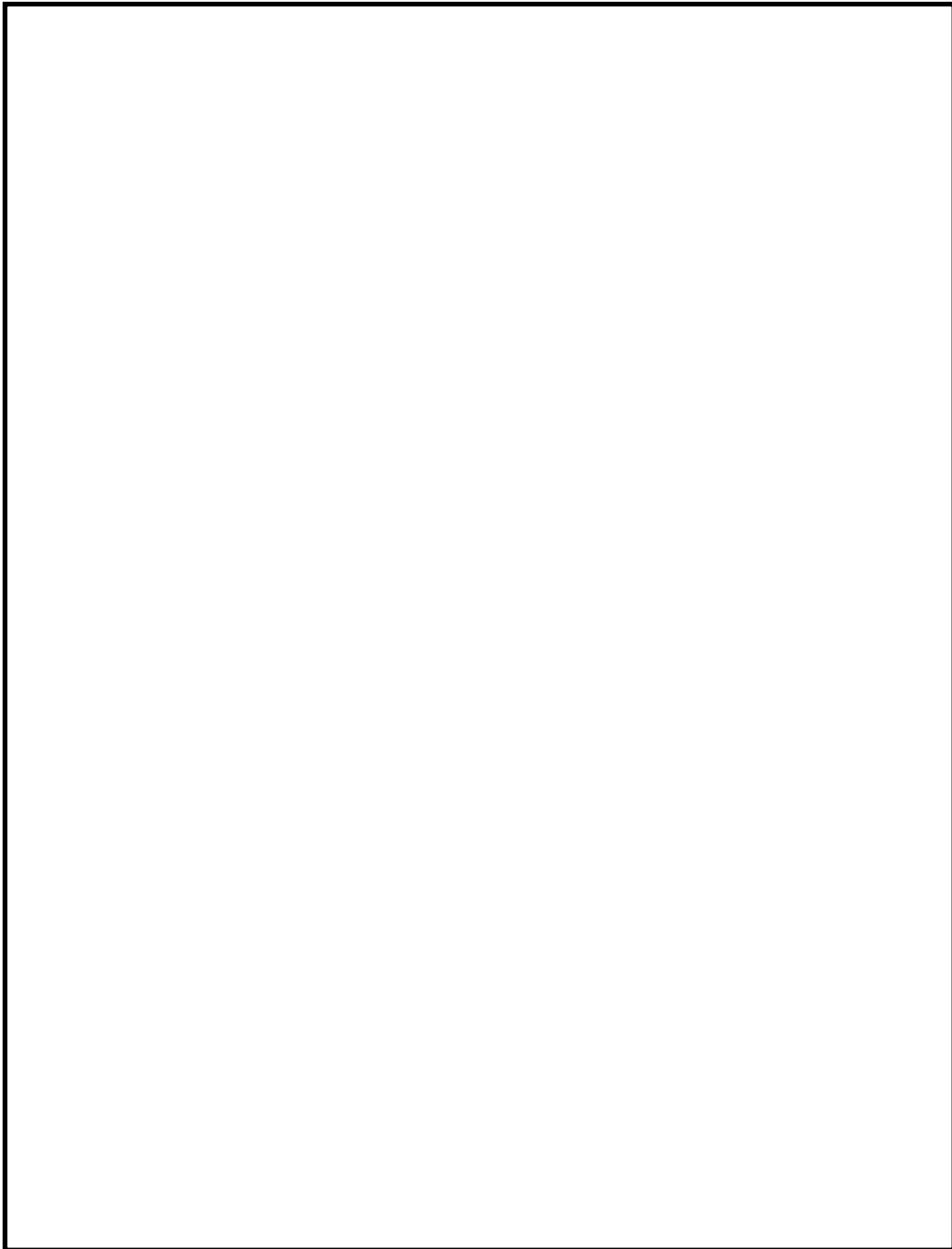
### Printed media

Newspapers are a good vehicle for presenting results: they can publish in a variety of formats, including human interest stories, letters to the editor, features, news, and “factoids.” In most cases, smaller dailies and weekly newspapers are the preferred target. Large papers, like the *Boston Globe*, will report on major rivers and state- or region-wide water issues, and occasionally on smaller water bodies with a “newsy” issue. So include these papers in your press-release list, but if you want regular data reports, focus your efforts on a *Cape Cod Times* or *Williamstown Advocate*.

#### Tips

- Avoid jargon.
- Explain your purpose.
- Clearly outline the study area.

News media may cover a topic in any of several ways. The most straightforward is the news story, reporting noteworthy events that have occurred since the last edition or broadcast. In addition, there are human interest pieces, feature stories, special-interest columns (e.g. real-estate, outdoors), and editorials. All have a different slant, and any



**Example 7-1. A human interest story.** (Article from *The Reminder*, Nov. 15 1994)

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of them may be appropriate for your data, depending on the issue, the timing, or the nature of your results.

### The human interest piece

Newspapers love stories about local folks and about kids, so find a volunteer willing to be interviewed and photographed. Work your data into the story by featuring volunteers *and* their findings in your press release. See how this was accomplished in Example 7-1, a human interest piece about an Eagle Scout's project at a local pond. The photo shows the scout holding a Secchi disk, and the narrative mentions water transparency levels as well as the aquatic plants found.

#### Getting your story in the paper

- Ask the paper about their publishing guidelines.
- Increase your chances of coverage by involving a school in your program; most papers provide ample coverage of local schools.

### Editorial page

This is the part of a newspaper where opinions are welcome, even expected. It's a good place to use persuasion with your data; describe the consequences of problems you've found and recommend solutions. There are three ways to get your data into the editorial page:

- A letter to the editor: the simplest, and widely read. No charts or jargon here, of course. Use lay terms and stick to the length restrictions the paper maintains.
- An op-ed piece: these are the opinion articles written by regular or guest columnists. They appear on the page opposite the paper's own editorials. These are usually 700 to 900 words in length. To get an op-ed printed, contact the editorial page editor and describe the issue and what you want to say. They may request a writing sample, or ask you to submit the piece for their consideration.
- The paper's own editorial: if you want your story here, contact the editor(s) and suggest they weigh in on the topic. Relay the high points of your findings, explain the issue, why it's important to the paper's readers, and discuss different angles (environment, health, economic aspects).

Whether you are making a pitch for editorial or news coverage of a story, it pays to establish good relations with the editors, sub-editors, and/or reporters. Contact them directly and introduce yourself and your issues. Each paper is different, but a few examples of departments which might have specific editors or reporters are: geographical, sports and outdoors, business, and science and environment. Once every year or so, you might want to arrange a meeting with the full editorial staff of the paper. In such a meeting, bring two or three of your staff, board or committee chairs; discuss the "big picture" of your watershed (issues and trends),

**Tips for Query Letters**

- The first sentence should be an attention grabber.
- Describe the content of your article and why the issue is relevant to the community, and specifically the paper's readers.
- Explain why you are qualified to write this article.
- Keep it to one page.
- Include a short writing sample.

your organization and monitoring program. Alert them to future events (such as your upcoming sampling season), and offer your organization as a source of news, background information, or commentary (i.e. when they are looking for a quote on a current issue). In this way, you may be able to get the paper to devote more coverage to the watershed.

**The feature story**

Feature stories are in-depth pieces on a particular topic. They work best as a discussion of monitoring results at the end of the season, or as an advance notice of an investigation you are about to conduct. To get "feature" coverage, contact a reporter and ask her/him to accompany you on a monitoring trip. The reporter might welcome the chance to cover something other than the Selectboard meeting. For the feature story, however, simple results are not enough; include analysis, context, and pictures. For instance, discuss how documented conditions affect swimming, fishing, or public health in town. Provide reporters with the salient points of the study, keeping data and background information to a minimum.

**The news story**

For news stories, send a press release (discussed below) or contact a reporter or editor directly. Generally, newspapers prefer to have material written by their own staff, but consider sending a query letter to the appropriate editor about publishing a piece written by your organization.

**Data Strategy:**

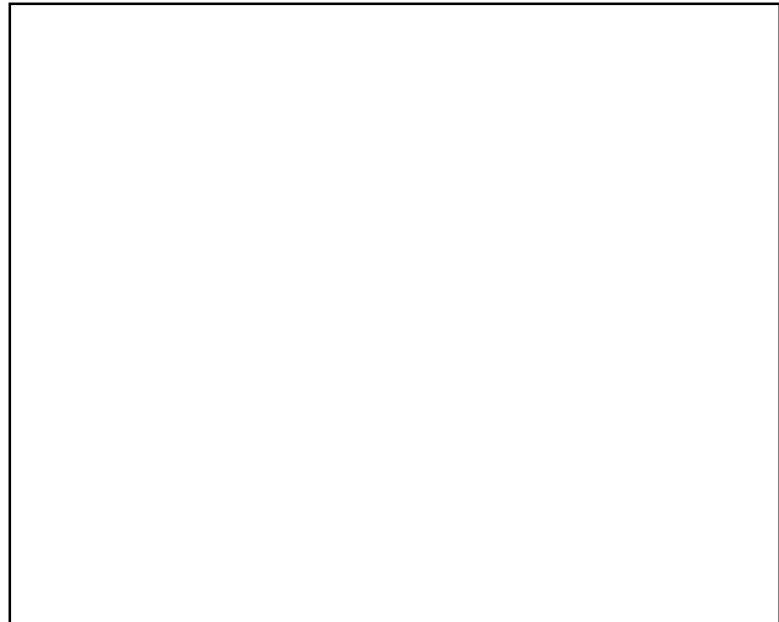
Use summarizing graphics to share your data rather than text. Talk to the paper's graphic artists or designers instead of sending your own graphics. They may be able to create an eye-catching display format for your data, which can be used thereafter for regular data reports.

**Prepare a Press Kit with:**

- a brief description of your organization.
- a business card of contact person.
- a map of watershed or monitoring area.
- photos of the resource, events, people, etc.
- a graphic of results.
- your most recent report.

**Factoids or mini-column**

Factoids are brief news updates, provided on a regular basis. Take advantage of the fact that monitoring and newspaper publishing take place on a regular basis. Convince the editor to make your data report a regular feature of the paper. It could be "Water Quality in Your Neighborhood," for example, or a graph in the weather section. The Lower Colorado River Water Authority uses a simple graphic to summarize water quality in the factoid shown in Example 7-2.



Example 7-2: A newspaper factoid.

## Electronic media

### Radio and commercial television

Radio and television can bring your story to more people than any other medium. Include them in your contact list for press releases and conferences, but expect brief coverage, as air time is precious. For a list of stations in your area, *Burrell's Media Directory* is found in most libraries. In addition to news stories, talk shows are an excellent forum for publicizing monitoring programs. Listen to or view the show several times before contacting the talk show host. If the show seems like a good match for your program, contact the host and explain why you think the show's audience would be interested in your program's findings.

#### Tips for presenting on TV

- Use a lot of graphics and concrete examples rather than raw numbers.
- Use everyday measures as a comparison: "40 micrograms per liter of total phosphorus in our lake is like dumping ten bags of lime on your 10 foot by 10 foot garden plot—enough to choke a chard."

### Public access television

Public access television is gaining popularity as a way to communicate with the community. Public access TV typically has a small staff and a crew of volunteers, whose job it is to train people like you to produce a television show. Equipment training is provided, and there is usually a small fee involved (or barter for volunteer time at the TV station). You may then use their equipment to film your show, or have someone else who is trained produce the show. In Amherst, the Conservation Commissioner has filmed several award winning programs. Most stations have lists of local producers; try collaborating with them.

It takes many hours to produce a TV program. It is best to recruit a volunteer whose sole responsibility will be to produce the show; don't ask this extra work of monitors or analysts. Outdoor footage can be shot by one or more people, and the show produced by your publicist volunteer.

Another public access TV venue is the "access soap box." An organization member films a ten-minute lecture about an event or issue relating to water quality. To make it more lively, have two people come and interview each other.

Meetings and group presentations can be broadcast on public access TV, possibly even live! Additionally, some public access stations have their own talk shows, with live interviews and questions called in from viewers.

Public access TV also functions as a community bulletin board. A text scan of community news and events is broadcast between programs, and is watched by a large audience. It is a good place to advertise upcoming events as well as some data "nuggets" such as, "Did you know that the Rocky River is clean enough for swimming? The Rocky River Watershed Association's 1999 monitoring results point to extremely low bacteria and turbidity levels."

This medium is an excellent place to provide educational content to complement your data. These stations will accept "canned," or previously produced videos by other parties. If you know of a good video that discusses the history of your watershed, or which explains nonpoint pollution, send it (or details on how to locate it) to them and ask them to run it along with your televised data presentation.

### **Press releases**

It is not necessary to produce your own show to be on TV. When you have news to share, bring the media to you with a press release or a press conference. Press releases provide the media with what an organization considers newsworthy. Topics can vary from an announcement of a local talk or event to a report of findings after years of sampling. Sometimes press releases are more risky than getting an article written by a reporter, in that some newspapers use them as filler, if at all. However, if the

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truly newsworthy, it may run as a news article rather than just an announcement.

When space is tight, the easiest way for an editor to fit an article into a page is to shorten it by truncating the last paragraph or paragraphs. Place the most important information at the front of the article, with background information following. Include maps and graphs or charts—they may be redone by the newspaper staff, but they are a good way to showcase data. Example 7-3 shows a sample press release that includes data.

## Press conferences

Consider holding a press conference for a discovery that's too important for a press release. However, be sure the news is big news—calling a conference to cover a routine issue or to generate publicity wastes reporters' time and will harm press relations.

### Tips for press conferences

- Schedule the conference between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. in the middle of the week.
- Send a media advisory notice at least 3 to 5 days in advance, and follow up with phone calls.
- Make sure the room is large enough for the number of people you expect. Provide chairs, and room at the back for cameras.
- Have a podium and a sign or logo to display in front or behind the speaker(s).
- Have an easel ready and prepare professional-looking graphics for display.
- Have a reception table at the entrance with a sign-in sheet and background material.
- Have on hand flyers and backgrounders.

Invite all the media to your conference, and send an information release to those who don't attend—by fax if possible—so they can have the option of picking up the story.

Press conferences can be held almost anywhere, but usually are held indoors. Backdrops, such as a watershed association banner, enhance TV potential. The media representatives will bring all of the equipment needed, but they may require power outlets.

Outdoor press conferences can work well, weather permitting. Consider holding the press conference down by the river, at a sampling station, but only if the location is convenient.

### Ways to Show Data

A press conference is much like a live presentation to a general audience. Most visual material should be displayed on an easel, however; the room will be fully lighted, so overheads and slides aren't appropriate.

A map should show the area of concern. It should be clear and readable from a distance. Handouts can include more information on the map if desirable. Charts and graphs also need to be clear and readable from a distance. Plan a run-through in the room a few days prior to the press conference to make sure the visual displays are effective.

*Little Muddy Creek Watershed Watch*  
Ourtown, MA 01000  
August 28, 1999

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: David Goliath, 413-890-4797 (d), 413-890-4979 (e), dng@email.com

**CONTAMINATION LINKED TO FAULTY SEWAGE SYSTEMS IN OUR TOWN**

Bacterial contamination linked to leaking residential sewage systems is above safe levels in the Little Muddy Creek, according to a study by the Little Muddy Creek Watershed Watch.

Residents are advised to avoid contact with the creek's water.

Water samples taken throughout the summer have shown the presence of fecal coliform bacteria, a sewage contaminant, in levels higher than state standards allow. The average values at 30 sampling sites are from 1.5 to 3 times the state standard of 400 colonies/100ml.

Bacterial counts have been rising over the last several years, according to studies done annually by the Little Muddy Creek Watershed Watch, a local volunteer organization. George Gomez, volunteer director of the group, said that over 250 samples collected by the group in the past year have confirmed the contamination. "It's clear to us from the pattern of contamination that residential sewage systems are the cause," said District Health Planner Mary Jones.

Fecal coliform bacteria may cause diarrhea, nausea, and other diseases. Residents are advised not to drink water, swim, or play in Little Muddy Creek until the problem can be alleviated. "We are planning to work with residents in neighborhoods near the creek to clean up the problem," said Jones.

[Insert accompanying graph here]

**Example 7-3: A press release that uses data.**

**Data Strategy:**

- Emphasize the data that prompted the press conference. Avoid tangential comparisons; get to the point quickly and stick to it.
- Photos (8 x 10 prints) that document the problem are also useful if available.

**PSAs**

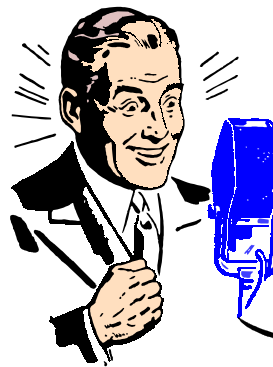
A public service announcement, or PSA, is a free message that is similar to a commercial. PSAs promote events and services of non-profit organizations and groups that serve the community. They run from 10 seconds to 30 seconds in length and appear on radio or on television.

Although PSAs are rarely a place for data presentation, consider them when holding a public meeting, calling for volunteers, or making information known. Data may fit into PSAs in certain situations.

PSAs can be created by the station at no cost to the organization. An announcer reads edited copy provided by the organization. If televised, the copy is read while information about the organization or event appears on the screen. Alternatively, PSAs can be produced outside the station by a professional production company for a fee. This is recommended for television PSAs, since homemade video is usually unacceptable for broadcast quality production.

**Tips for PSAs**

- Contact stations ahead of time to find out their PSA requirements.
- Include your organization name, address, phone number, and a person to contact.
- Include the start and stop dates to air the PSA.
- Double-space the text to allow for easy reading and editing.
- Time the copy at a normal reading speed and include the length in seconds. Estimate read time long rather than short.
- If a name or word is difficult to pronounce, include a phonetic spelling.



*Little Muddy Creek Watershed Watch*

Ourtown, Mass. 01000

August 28, 1999

Contact: David Goliath, 413-890-4797 (d), 413-890-4979 (e),  
dng@email.com

Start: Immediately

Stop: September 15, 1999

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT: 30 seconds

Is it safe to swim in the Little Muddy Creek? Bacteria counts are up this year, and leaking sewage systems are to blame. Find out more on Monday, September 15th, at 7 p.m. when the Little Muddy Creek Watershed Watch presents a free slide show at the Public Library, Main Street, Ourtown. Little Muddy Creek Watershed Watch is a volunteer organization dedicated to preserving water quality. For more information, call 413-890-3200.

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT: 15 seconds

Is it safe to swim in the Little Muddy Creek? Find out on Monday, September 15th, at 7 p.m. when the Little Muddy Creek Watershed Watch presents a free slide show at the Public Library, Main Street, Ourtown.

For more information, call 413-890-3200.

**Example 7-4: Public Service Announcement.****In conclusion**

To reach people outside an organization, send results to your local newspaper, radio, or television station. Developing a good relationship with a reporter or editor is crucial for your story to appear in the media—and so is packaging your data in an attractive, yet simple format.

Take the time to develop backup information and a press kit, so that the media are provided with your story in a timely fashion. Last week's news won't likely be broadcast or printed.

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