



# SPEAK UP!

*Guide to Strategic  
Media Tools and  
Tactics to Amplify  
the Voices of  
People in the Sex  
Trades*

RED  UMBRELLA  
PROJECT

**MEDIA** is a major site of struggle, and sometimes a place where the voices of people involved in the sex trades can be heard – though also a place where our words can be twisted, our stories portrayed badly, and our experiences misrepresented. At best, interactions with media make it possible for people in the sex trades to be heard on a large scale and participate in public dialogue about issues and policies that impact our lives. At their worst, interactions with media (consensual and not) can destroy life as we know it, causing us to lose friends, family, housing, livelihoods, and more. Dealing with media, especially mainstream media, is both an art and a skill – and it takes practice to do it well, though there will always be factors beyond our control.

**“Speak Up! Guide to Strategic Media Tools and Tactics to Amplify the Voices of People in the Sex Trades”** shares information, skills, and tactics for engaging with the media for those who want to achieve better and more effective media representation of people in the sex trades. The guide is geared toward people who are interested in engaging with media because they want to make change by and for people in the sex trades – both in the ways we are represented and in the institutional structures that negatively impact our lives.

This guide is the result of five years of media trainings, and many more years of saying things to the media out of anger and frustration, not strategy. Since 2009 more than 50 people have taken our weekend-long intensive media training, and we’ve offered abbreviated versions of the workshop to more than 100 people in cities like San Francisco, Toronto, and London.

The main developers of the Speak Up! media workshops and these materials are Audacia Ray and Eliyanna Kaiser, and the manual also includes supplementary contributions by Eileen Rogers. We have also gratefully received feedback over the years from the participants of the trainings, and we have tried to include many of their suggestions and requests for information in this guide.

If you have questions about the material in this guide, wish to use it in your own programs, or are interested in bringing us to your town to do a media training, please contact us at [info@redumbrellaproject.org](mailto:info@redumbrellaproject.org)

**Audacia Ray,**  
Executive Director  
**Red Umbrella Project**  
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## *Crafting Your Message*

## *The Request, the Reporter, and the Interview*

# REACTIVE MEDIA

When a reporter reaches out to you or your organization about a story, it's called "reactive media" because you must react to a situation that is being thrust upon you; you aren't in control of the direction of the story or creating your own media.

## *Why and When Do Reporters Call?*

Obviously, reporters can call for a myriad of reasons and we can't predict them all. But there are a number of specific types of situations that are common and have certain characteristics.

### **1. Scandals Involving VIPs – When someone famous gets caught with their pants down.**

#### ***Why is the Reporter Calling You?***

- To get general background about how the industry works for the news coverage or leads on where else the reporter should go for info;
- For a sidebar story about your life because the public is interested in your profession but knows little about it;
- Because you work(ed) at the establishment that got busted;
- Because you are the person the VIP was caught with.

#### ***Characteristics of the Press Cycle***

- Story moves quickly and, depending on the celebrity, politician, or other VIP involved, tends towards national or even international coverage;
- Story can cycle for weeks or months as new details emerge or events occur (resignations, impeachments, court dates, sentencing, etc.);
- Fierce competition between all media markets;
- Getting information about the sex worker(s) involved in the scandal is a high priority;
- Getting information about how the industry functions for background or sidebar stories is a secondary priority, often assigned to more junior journalists;
- There is often a "discovery" element to these stories. When the press covers the sex industry in terms of its actual mechanics, everything is newsworthy: who chooses this work, who patronizes sex workers, how advertising works, how transactions work, what is done, where, and why;
- It can be possible to use these opportunities to raise policy issues.

#### ***Things to Think About***

- Is there an angle to this story that I can focus on that will draw out sex worker rights issues?

## **2. Crime Stories – When clients, managers, sex business employees, or sex workers are arrested because of their involvement with an illegal element of the sex industry.**

### ***Why is the Reporter Calling You?***

- In general, the reporter is not calling you. If she is, it is because she hopes that you are involved in the crime as a witness, a victim, or a conspirator, or that you know something about it (people with good lawyers don't talk to the press when they are involved in a criminal matter, but maybe you will – reporters will always try);
- The public has discovered the existence of some segment of the sex industry and is hungry for more details.

### ***Characteristics of the Press Cycle***

- Typically a short press cycle punctuated by the occasional resurrection of the story when the situation changes (trial, sentencing, another bust, etc.);
- Naming/describing/getting photos of the sex workers involved is a high priority;
- Getting vivid details of the crime(s) is a high priority;
- Tabloids are always most interested in these stories, but some community-based media and local television will also bite;
- Few (if any) opportunities to raise other issues.

### ***Things to Think About***

- It is unlikely to be beneficial to an individual sex worker to be involved in a story about a specific crime or arrest. It could even serve to incriminate you. What are you getting out of this?
- If your organization wants to take on criminal justice reform issues, it is even more important to be careful and selective about which stories you decide to be publicly on the record about;
- If you are not directly involved, those who are may be facing serious charges and your contribution to media around this story could have implications for someone else's legal defense strategy. Be sure of what you are doing when you are speaking for others.

### **3. Dead Sex Worker/Client Stories – When someone working in the sex industry, or a client of the sex industry, is murdered or dies in that context.**

#### ***Why is the Reporter Calling You?***

- In general, the reporter is not calling you, but if he is it's likely because you are a sex worker from the same stroll, escort website, brothel, strip club, dungeon, etc;
- The reporter wants to hear that people are scared and angry and what they are doing to protect themselves or retaliate (in the case of sex worker murders) or to get a sense of how the client died (in the case of a client death) and why the sex industry is dangerous for everyone;
- The reporter may be doing a human-interest story about what it's like to work in the industry you work in;
- If you know the victim and the reporter becomes aware of that, the reporter may call you for details about that person's sex worker/client narrative.

#### ***Characteristics of the Press Cycle***

- As long as the body count continues, the press is covering this as front page news;
- If there is a large body count but little police action, the press often covers that;
- If a client is dead, the press coverage is hostile towards sex workers;
- If sex workers are dead, the press coverage tends towards sympathy for sex workers, but leans heavily towards the inherent evils of sex work as it victimizes the people working in the industry.

#### ***Things to Think About***

- If members of your community are at risk for violence, make sure you know what their needs are before speaking to the press. If you are not from that specific community, ask someone who is, or refer the press request;
- Certain reporters will be looking for a tourist-style story (What is life in a strip club really like? etc.). Can you or your organization provide that and use the opportunity to raise your issues?
- If a client has died, the press is casting for the role of villain when they call. Be wary about getting involved;
- If you knew the victim and the reporter is doing a profile piece on that person, they will mostly be interested in a "fall from grace" or "down on their luck" piece. This is an opportunity to humanize the person you knew, and perhaps raise policy issues that might have protected her from violence, but it will be challenging to get the reporter to break from the script.

**4. Discovery Stories – When a news outlet reports on the seemingly obvious (or obviously stupid), something that seems very everyday to you – like “sex workers use the internet!” or “sex workers are affected by the economic recession!”**

**Why is the Reporter Calling You?**

- You are the story, and without you or a colleague of yours, he has nothing.

**Characteristics of the Press Cycle**

- Not typically tied to current events;
- Cyclical and predictable. The existence of the sex industry and any changes it undergoes will continue to be recycled as tantalizing news for as long as sex work is not a part of mainstream dialogue;
- Almost every outlet and media format will do these types of stories because sex sells and people are curious about sex work;
- While most outlets will not allow their reporters or market to cover the same story twice, it is common for these stories to break those rules;
- Flash cycles: the reporter prints or posts a story and a few media outlets may re-run the piece or re-do the idea in the next one or two days;
- Sometimes reporters look to confirm a common myth or their own ideas about sex work with these stories (“trend” piece);
- Standards of evidence for these stories are very low: one sex worker quoted is enough to announce a trend or to make assumptions;
- Very good opportunities to raise issues. Reporters are usually happy to be led anywhere you want to take them.

**Things to Think About**

- Make sure you understand the reporter’s hypothesis or what kind of story she thinks she wants to tell; often reporters are after an angle, and that is particularly true with these types of stories;
- Discovery stories often rely on lots of descriptions of characters. The reporter may describe what you look like, and describe your ads or reviews if she can find them.
- Even if you ask the reporter to protect your identity, these stories can out people through descriptions.

## **5. Legislation/Policy Stories – When a legislator, government agency, major advocacy organization, or another entity proposes legislation or policy action that will impact the sex industry.**

### **Why is the Reporter Calling You?**

- The reporter is probably not calling you. With stories of this type, it is all too common that little effort is made to ask sex workers who are impacted what they think of the legislation or proposal;
- If the reporter is calling you it is usually for an up or down opinion on the issue;
- Do you like this proposal or bill? Why or why not? It is unlikely that the reporter will assume that you or your organization has a real political agenda.

### **Characteristics of the Press Cycle**

- Usually short-lived. These sorts of stories usually have a life of one day in the press before they are old news (with the exception that if a bill is introduced the passage of the bill may justify a second press cycle);
- Policy and legislation that can be construed as an anti-trafficking measure has a slightly longer shelf-life;
- Often the proposal is not realistic and will never be implemented, but unlike the thousands of other measures that are proposed and not implemented, this one is newsworthy because of its sexy topic.

### **Things to Think About**

- While these sorts of press stories are the ones that you are least likely to be called about, they may be the stories that you most want to be called about. So, considering the short cycle, if you or your organization has something to say on the topic, it pays to be proactive;
- Reporters are often “casting for a role,” so be firm about your messaging and talking points;
- If the proposal will negatively impact sex workers, the person behind the policy idea or the legislation usually has a simple motivation of self-interest. Politicians want to generate press about themselves, and nothing does that faster than proposing a sex industry-related bill or policy, regardless of how realistic it is.



**6. Sex Trafficking – When a story about international or domestic sex trafficking, exploitation, and the absolute worst of the sex industry is reported on, often with horrendous (and unconfirmed) statistics and assumptions about uniformly awful experiences in the sex industry.**

**Why is the Reporter Calling You?**

- The reporter has identified you as an expert on trafficking, perceives you as a survivor of trafficking (though he will probably use the word “victim”) who may be willing to tell her story publicly, or thinks you may be able to introduce him to either of the previous sources.

**Characteristics of the Press Cycle**

- These stories seem to have legs more and more frequently and can be spurred on by almost nothing, based on the horror people have around forced sex, exploitation, and child sexual abuse – totally legit things to be upset about;
- Stories often center around reports or statistics that are bogus (like “300,000 young people in the United States are at risk for domestic sex trafficking,” or “40,000 women are expected to be sex trafficked to X city for X sporting event”;
- Journalists quote experts from very well funded anti-trafficking organizations that are very visible in the domestic and international non-governmental organizations scene;
- There is often little room to introduce a rights-based commentary or to critique statistics, but having good references is very important.

**Things to Think About**

- It is very difficult to get a foothold in these stories to discuss the rights of people in the sex industry because you will get “but this is terrible!” or “how can you defend this terrible industry?” comments, which leads to...
- Being defensive of the sex industry (even though you may feel that way) is a risk and should be done very carefully. Setting up a dichotomy between “exploited victims” and “well adjusted sex workers” is not really a good strategy because the issue is infinitely more complex and can make you look unsympathetic;
- Sometimes the best thing to do when talking to reporters is to offer background information and plant a seed for them to do a follow-up story on sex workers’ rights, or to introduce them to good sources;
- Unless you really know your stuff and can critique the reporter or the anti-trafficking organizations’ approach, you can get tripped up easily.

**7. Health and Harm Reduction – When some aspect of health that impacts people in the sex industry (or impacts “public health” and is linked to the sex industry) becomes news.**

**Why is the Reporter Calling You?**

- You are involved in a health-related incident (like spread of STIs in the porn industry);
- Your job is or may be affected by a health issue or legislation affecting a health issue;
- You are an expert, like a peer health educator or worker in the health care sector.

**Characteristics of the Press Cycle**

- News cycles quickly get inflammatory and the concept of “rights” gets easily lost, with people claiming they want to protect people in the sex trades and members of the general public, and that policies/legislation are “for the good” of people in the sex trades;
- Misinformation about risk, health practices, and transmission of STIs is frequently included in these reports;
- The viewpoints of health experts and policymakers are given more weight than those of the people who are actually affected by the issue.

**Things to Think About**

- When health and harm reduction issues are raised in the media, this is a really good opportunity to make our voices heard;
- If you don’t get contacted by reporters, reach out to them with your perspective;
- If you don’t get included in the initial story, you may be able to get a follow-up story about what people in your community do to keep yourselves and your partners safe – this is an angle many reporters won’t think about.

# EARNED MEDIA

You have a story that you want to tell and you reach out to news media to get it covered.

## ***Newsworthy***

- Events with photo, interview, video opportunities
- Stories with a personal angle
- Different angle on an ongoing story
- Trend pieces about the industry
- Anything you think is newsworthy in the sex industry probably is!

## ***Hard sells***

- Panels
- Lectures
- Policy stories
- Statements without personal stories

## ***Communications products for media outreach***

- Press release
- Press statement
- Press conference
- Letter to the editor
- Pitch
- Opinion editorial

***What gets  
coverage (and  
what doesn't)?***

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **WHY?**

- To get attention for a news item you'd like to get covered that is not already in the news;
- To announce an event.

### **WHO?**

- Can be written collectively, with no author or byline. Putting your logo at the top is optional;
- Agree on a contact person (you can have up to three of them listed);
- Contact person should know who is available for comment and in what capacity – the contact person may be the one giving the quotes, or he may be doing intake on reporters and providing background on the issue. If the contact person acts as the buffer, he can educate the reporter and then prepare the source for the conversation with the reporter.

### **Press Release Format**

- Like a newspaper article, the most important information in a press release comes first. Each sentence after the first is less important;
- Keep press releases short (one page or less): 3-4 paragraphs, each 2-3 sentences long, is ideal;
- Press releases should always include at least one attributed quote – if you have a good quote in the release, some journalists will just use that quote, or even whole chunks of text from the press release (it's a big success if that happens to you);
- You can also include a few sentences of narrative about a person's experience.
- Reporters want sources and individual stories, not generalized ideas about an issue;
- Always list a cell phone number in addition to email address for the contact person;
- At the end of the press release, put -30- or ### - this indicates the end of the document.

## **PRESS STATEMENT**

### **WHY?**

- To comment and be quoted on an issue that impacts you;
- To respond to a current event or issue affecting the community.

### **WHO?**

- Author is a group or an organization. Can be written collectively;
- Offer contact for further comments.

### **Press Statement Format**

- A press statement provides the perspective of an organization (not an individual) on an issue or event or piece of legislation. The whole piece should be placed in quotes, but it doesn't need to be attributed to an individual;
- When a journalist uses this in a piece, it will be credited as, for example, "According to an advocacy organization, the Sex Workers Outreach Project...";
- Should be less than a page, preferably one paragraph all in quotes, with contact info for one or two people.

# **PRESS CONFERENCE**

## **WHY?**

- To make a major announcement, start or conclude a rally/organizing effort, launch a report, or respond to a controversy or accusations in a controlled way.

## **WHO?**

- Press conferences are called by organizations, politicians, public figures, or individuals who are at the center of a scandal or other event;
- Speakers should be a mix of “experts” (published authors, professors, etc), people with direct experience on the issue, and high profile allies (politicians, movement leaders, celebrities);
- You should pitch the press conference to reporters, including print, radio, and television.

## **Press Conference Format**

- Location is important. Press conferences can be held in spaces designated for them (most local governments can help you with this), on the steps of the city/town hall, or in a location significant to the issue. If you are using a public space, make sure to get the appropriate permits, especially if you are planning to use amplified sound;
- Have someone (not someone who is giving remarks) be the MC and introduce each speaker. The MC is also responsible for standing at the mic or podium after the speakers and calling on reporters who raise their hands with questions;
- Press conferences can have just one speaker, but when they are announcing an event, report, or organizing initiative, they often have many. Remarks should be written and last no more than five minutes (one to two typed pages) per speaker;
- Speakers can stand in a line behind the mic/podium and step forward in turn, or they can sit at the front of the room in a row and speak from their seated positions or get up to walk to the mic. Don't have the speakers step up from the audience - it takes too long and is disruptive. Also, having a panel is visually more authoritative;
- Have a greeter for reporters as they come in – this person should share printed materials with them, which will include the press release (which they may have already received), fact sheets, reports, and bios of the speakers. These can be piled separately or assembled in a press packet.

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### WHY?

- To enter a news cycle;
- To comment on an article published that day or the day before.

### WHO?

- You don't need to be an "expert." You can be a member of the affected community or a "concerned citizen."

### LTE FORMAT

- Keep it short. Most letters to the editor are 200 words or less. If you keep it short there is less of a risk of your piece being drastically edited to a message that isn't your main message;
- Make a single point. A letter to the editor is not the time for nuance or complex, multilayered arguments;
- Directly reference the article you're responding to. The subject of the email should be formatted: "Re: Article Title, date";
- Don't title it. This is the editor's job. You're wasting your time thinking of something clever that will just be replaced;
- If possible, write on behalf of an organization. Having a clear tie to the community that is being written about is always an asset. If you are comfortable, identifying yourself as a present or former sex worker in the first line of the letter is a good idea;
- Most outlets require your real contact information and will verify it before running your letter. These are professional standards or journalism, so if you don't feel comfortable with this, you are probably not the best person to write that letter - give your ready-made draft to someone else.

# ANATOMY OF AN ANGRY LETTER, OR: HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The following letter was published in the New York Daily News on Sunday, December 19, 2010

Lead with personal connection to the story. LTEs from the affected community have a better chance of getting published.

Respond directly to an article that was recently published. LTEs are part of a dialogue, so make sure you are holding up your part of the "conversation." It is best to submit your LTE the same day or the day after the article that inspired you.

Refer to the article you are responding to. When you send your LTE via email, the subject of the email should be "Re: No one notices a missing hooker, Dec 16" - or whatever the title is, along with the date it was published.

Make only one point in your LTE. There were a lot of problems with the article I was responding to, but LTEs are a very limited space. Keep your message simple.

When possible, tie the LTE in with something else that is happening in your community, especially if it demonstrates the point you are making.

When you submit your LTE, give the paper your name and title/organization if it is relevant and the org approves of you writing the letter. Provide your city and state, email, and a phone number. Some papers will follow up with you to fact check details. Writing a letter to the editor can also show that you are available as a source, and may lead to getting calls from reporters at the paper.

## The monsters who prey on women

The title of a letter is never up to you. Don't bother trying to write one.

Manhattan: As a former sex worker who has seen countless acts of violence against my friends and loved ones go unpunished by the justice system and unacknowledged by both the media and law enforcement, I commend Michael Daly for calling out the lack of reportage on the murder of sex workers ("No one notices a missing hooker... until it's 2 missing hookers," Dec. 16)

The serial killer Joel Rifkin made the assertion, to the Daily News, that "no one is looking" for missing prostitutes, but that is patently untrue.

Use quotes from the piece to set up your argument. You can also paraphrase what is being said in the piece, but be sure to use strong language that responds to what is literally in the piece. LTEs are not the place for theories about what the paper or the media generally are doing.

Friday, Dec. 17 was the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, which provided the media and the public an opportunity to listen up. Sex workers in New York marked the day with a vigil and community speak-out at the Metropolitan Community Church in Manhattan, where we gathered to mourn victims of violence and support each other.

Audacia Ray,  
The Red Umbrella Project

Sign your letter with your address, email, and phone number - the paper uses this info to check in with you, and will usually publish the city and state.



## **PITCH**

### **WHY?**

- A quick way to find out if your story is interesting without writing a full press release;
- To build on a relationship with a journalist.

### **WHO?**

- Communications/PR person can negotiate the piece;
- Initial contact doesn't need to come from the person who is impacted.

### **Pitch Format**

- Do it via phone or email;
- Keep it simple - 30 second pitch (rehearse!) or a few sentences;
- Provide a specific subject or angle;
- Offer interview subjects who are prepped;
- No need for a full press release in initial contact, but have more info ready;
- If pitching to write a piece yourself, you need more detail/credentials.

## **OPINION EDITORIAL (OP ED)**

### **WHY?**

- To publish a nuanced opinion piece on an issue impacting your community;
- To respond to a timely issue of importance;
- To make a call to action.

### **WHO?**

- Author must be a prominent expert with credentials/position of power;
- Can be drafted collectively, but should have a single author.

### **Op Ed Format**

- Pay attention to word count (usually 750ish);
- Quick turnaround, exclusive submission;
- Capitalize on your personal experience and expertise;
- Make an argument backed up by evidence.

**Learn more at <http://theopedproject.org>**

# MANAGING REACTIVE AND EARNED MEDIA: MAKING A MEDIA TEAM

Dealing with incoming media requests and looking for opportunities to enter the conversation can feel really daunting, especially if you are part of a volunteer-run group or you're just starting to develop a media strategy. But if you break up the functions into several different jobs, you can develop a system to process media requests and make sure you minimize wasting your time on these interactions. Here are some roles that different members of your media team can take on – not everyone has to give quotes to the media to be part of a plan for dealing with media!

- **Message strategists:** ask the questions: why should we engage? what will we get out of this? what are our key messages?
- **Screeners:** serve as initial point of contact & negotiation with reporters, connect reporters to sources once they've been vetted, manage relationship with reporters through the process of the piece, be the contact on releases/statements.
- **News monitors:** follow local and national news, look for stories that you can weigh in on, make note of good journalists for future pitching.
- **Article trackers:** track articles published that quote or source your organization or group, and document the experience of working with the reporter.
- **Writers & editors:** draft press releases and statements, provide support for individual group members writing letters to the editor, articles, blog posts.
- **Pitchers:** blast out press releases and statements (fax and email), pitch to individual reporters you build relationships with (email and phone).
- **Sources:** folks who are comfortable being interviewed as sex workers or advocates (various levels of exposure, to be discussed in each situation).



## Crafting Your Message

**Message** is the theme that runs through all of your individual talking points and comes directly from your overall agenda. You will be asked different questions, but your message must run through them. A message is a complete thought, not one word. For example: ***The New York State legislature should pass the No Condoms as Evidence bill so that sex workers are not discouraged from carrying condoms when they work.***

**Talking points** are short, specific, and prepared statements that address the issue at hand. You will be asked questions that will not fit these talking points, but whenever possible, you will return to them. It's best to only have two or three good talking points; you never need more. For example: ***1. This is a significant problem – condoms were filed as evidence in dozens of police reports last year in New York City. 2. Outreach workers report that distributing free condoms to protect the health of sex workers and their clients is difficult because people fear arrest for possessing them.***

**Your agenda** is your goals; the things or status that you and your organization want to achieve. This is the reason you do media work. If a story does not give you an opportunity to further some part of your agenda, it's rarely worth your time (or a good idea). For example: ***Our agenda is to further the labor rights of sex workers through changes in the legal system.***

Before thinking about how to craft your message, it's a good idea to start out thinking about the messages that you are up against. "Messaging" is always a battle between competing ideas, and reporters often feel compelled or are compelled by their editors to "balance" viewpoints within an article or a media cycle.

## WHAT'S THE "RIGHT" MESSAGE, POLITICALLY?

People in the sex trades come from many different kinds of backgrounds and have varying experiences and opinions on their work. These differences in experience mean that perspectives and opinions vary from person to person. Not only do journalists assume that people in the sex trades are a monolith, but sex workers often forget that our opinions are not always the same, nor are our politics or goals.

Think about the unintended messages of things you say. How can things you are framing in a positive way also have negative effects? For example, you might say, "Not all sex workers are drug addicts and street prostitutes." The subtext of this phrase is, "There's something wrong with being a drug addict or a street worker. I'm better than them. I'm not asking you to respect or give them rights. I'm asking you to respect and give me rights." In this example, your intention might be to show you are like other people and humanize yourself. This can be done by saying, "People have extreme and polarizing ideas about who sex workers are, but like anyone, we are just trying to make ends meet and provide for our families." This conveys diversity without marginalizing anyone in the community.

It's easy to get overwhelmed by the responsibility that comes with doing media as a sex worker when the expectation is that you speak for the entire community. It's also easy to go too far in the other direction. Many people who are not involved in the sex industry speak on behalf of sex workers without our consent, so it's important and crucial that the voices of individual sex workers are heard.

### **How do we strike this balance?**

- Be aware of your bias and how your own background and experiences color your opinions;
- If you know that there are valid and different sex worker opinions out there, say so if you can do it without undermining yourself;
- When in doubt, don't qualify your opinions as "just my opinion" or anything like that - state your position affirmatively and in the active voice.

## WHAT'S THE "RIGHT" MESSAGE, AUDIENCE-WISE?

Messaging is all about audience because your agenda is all about achieving some sort of change.

- Your first question is: who has the power to give us what we want?
- Your second question is: who influences that person or those people?

The answer to the first and second questions is your audience, the people you are trying to reach.

- Often your audience is primarily people in positions of governmental power who are influenced by voters.
- Tackling "the general public" (i.e. all voters) is very hard, so it's best to concentrate on segments of the population where we have a tactical advantage, that is, where the values of the general American public intersect with goals that sex workers want to advance.
- Typical American values that are useful to us include:

*Individualism*  
*Entrepreneurship*  
*Human rights*  
*Control over your own body*  
*Less government intrusion*  
*Privacy*  
*Not wasting tax money*

## **WHAT ARE SOME THINGS TO AVOID?**

- Sex workers are expected to be out of control, hypersexual, inappropriate objects of ridicule. Don't give it to them.
- Don't preach the revolution. It's okay to state ideals in a way that shows you have a political viewpoint, but actually calling for the overthrow of the money system/patriarchy will sound ridiculous to 99% of the population.
- An agenda with unrealistic goals. You are far more likely to effectively "win" something for your community by setting an agenda that is within reach. This doesn't mean diluting your overall, long-term goals from your message, but it does mean having a concrete and pragmatic short-term goal that provides a concrete solution to a problem.
- It is highly dangerous to appear to condone underage prostitution or trafficking; likewise it is unfair to people who work with youth in the sex trade to make generalizations about youth experiences or to moralize about their situations.
- Do you believe in the Goddess? That milk is rape and meat is murder? Other issues have no place in your message. They confuse your audience and have the potential to alienate people who might otherwise be amenable to what you have to say about sex work.

# DOING INTAKE FOR A MEDIA INQUIRY

Deciding whether or not to be interviewed for a story can be difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that reporters must move quickly and you may miss a vital opportunity by being too cautious. Often the initial contact is hours if not minutes away from the reporter's deadline.

## *The Request, the Reporter, and the Interview*

But, just like many workers in the sex industry screen clients, we should screen reporters to decide whether or not we want to talk with them.

This list of questions can help you think through this important decision.

### Questions to Ask the Reporter

- What is your name, outlet, what type of article are you writing, and what is your *deadline*? Reporters sometimes tell you their deadline is earlier than it is in reality.
- What were you thinking I would contribute to your story?
- What is the *angle* of your story? They may not answer this question or be at a place in their research where they have this clearly formulated.
- Who else are you talking to for this story? This gives you an opportunity to know what kind of research they've done, and steer them to better sources when appropriate.
- Are you looking for *background* for your story or a direct quote?
- Can you provide me with the questions and give me some time to think about them? For TV, you can usually get general topics but not exact questions, and the booker will often mock interview you to see if you talk well and say the kinds of things they want to hear. Longer form radio hosts will often give you questions in advance. Print reporters probably won't, but increasingly they will let you respond to an interview via email.
- Can I review my quotes before you submit the story? Reporters will almost never let you review the whole story before they file it (unless they are making a documentary film), but you can usually review your own quotes.
- Optional: Can I be quoted using a *pseudonym*? Will you be including information about me beyond what I tell you (what I look like, any online material you have found, etc.)?



## Questions to Ask Yourself

- What will you achieve by being quoted in this story or spending time giving the reporter background information?
- If you gain nothing at this time, is this reporter worth helping out to develop a good relationship for the future, or is the story likely to be harmful?
- Are you the best person to give information or a quote to this reporter, or is there someone else who would be better for this role?
- Has the reporter satisfied your privacy concerns?
- Is there anything about your role in this that you still don't understand?

## THE REPORTER'S ROLE

Like you, reporters are doing a job, and most of them are trying to do it well – or at least quickly. Remember that the reporter is supposed to be charming and able to put sources at ease, just like when you do your job. The better they do this, the more likely they are to get more and better information. But remember that even when reporters are chatty or when you build a relationship with them over time, they are not your friends. They are professional contacts and you are their source.

Most reporters will call or email you directly. They are probably trying to get in touch with a few sources at the same time. For newspapers, most reporters cover a beat (like “crime” or “local politics”) and they might not be interested in a bigger story – or even in a position to be able to pitch one. Most of the time, when you talk to a reporter who is on deadline for a short piece (which is most common), she is essentially casting for a role – she already knows the story she wants to tell and has a cast lineup in her head – policy expert, police officer, sex worker, etc. Often, even if you are both a policy expert and a sex worker, the reporter will want you to be either one or the other.

For television and radio appearances, you will most likely talk to a booker or a producer, not the anchor or radio personality themselves. You can generally ask a lot more questions when you are talking to someone whose entire job is to find the right talent to put on the show. The booker will usually ask you some sample questions, though be prepared for the actual interview to have a different tone than the pre-interview conversation. And if they want you to do a studio interview in the city you live in (or a nearby one), ask them to send a car for you! They usually have a budget for this and it will make your transportation much less stressful. If you are doing television and showing your face and if you typically wear makeup, ask if they have hair and makeup staff available. If they say yes, tell them you will want a touch up. Apply your own makeup at home and let them touch you up and make sure you aren't shiny – if you let them do your makeup from scratch it will take forever and you will not look like yourself.

# SELF INVENTORY

When you are considering a media request, there are many things to think about. In addition to the questions on the media intake page, here are some things to consider when you are deciding whether or not to take an interview.

## From a personal perspective:

- How do I feel today – am I able to negotiate with the journalist/news source and stand up for myself in an interview?
- Who is my support system – do I have someone to discuss talking points with and someone to help me debrief and relax after the interview?
- What are the potential harms that could come to me personally if I engage in this interview? What are the benefits? What is my support system for the worst case scenario?

## Self Presentation

It may seem unfair, but the way you look is always part of the story because it is part of how you communicate who you are. In a written piece for which you meet the reporter in person, it is likely that your outfit and mannerisms (and sometimes accessories) will be described. These are details that can potentially identify the subject (one woman was identified by a client by a reporter's description of her handbag), so be cautious about meeting a reporter in person when you need your identity protected. Before you leave the house, either stand in front of a mirror and describe what you're wearing out loud or have a friend or roommate do so. You might be surprised how some of these details will sound in an article (one woman was surprised to read the only description of her in an article was her "mane of blond hair and red lacquered nails," while another was amused by the description, "in her scruffy black hoodie, she looked more like a college-aged lesbian than a hooker"). You can't control everything the reporter perceives and writes about you, but it's worth taking a minute to be aware of how you are presenting yourself.

## Stories

It is good to think about and rehearse a few stories that are either personal experiences or anecdotes about "a friend" and his experiences in the sex industry. Facts are excellent to have alongside your talking points, but personal stories really make an issue come alive and make the situations of people in the sex industry relatable. Prepare and practice telling a few one- to two-sentence stories to help illustrate your points.

Know your boundaries – what are the things you don't want to talk about? Personal experiences of assault? How much money you make? Be prepared for questions like this and have an answer, even if it is a polite but firm, "I'd rather not discuss that" (but also be prepared for the reporter to ask the same questions again in a different way). Or be prepared to redirect the interview with a sentence that starts with, "What is really important here is..."

# INTERVIEW STRESS MANAGEMENT

Everyone gets nervous when talking to the press. Don't worry about it, but concentrate on ways to mitigate it. Don't get in your own way.

- Practice! Take turns taping interviews with your friends and watch and critique them together.
- If you got the questions in advance, come with prepared notes.
- Take your time and speak slowly. You always speak more quickly when you're nervous, and this doesn't give you enough time to think or make your points clearly.
- Be brief! Most people get tongue-tied by over-explaining. Answers are usually better and more effective when they are short. Less is more, and a longer answer means you are likely "off-message" and giving the reporter an opportunity to pick and choose what message he wants to use, rather than just giving him what you want.
- Don't lie or pretend to understand something – it will bite you.
- Don't use jargon or industry-insider terms, unless you explain them.

**Why am I so nervous? What did I even just say?**

## ***How do I answer that evil question that has nothing to do with what I want to talk about?***

This is a bit tricky because sometimes the answer is to deflect completely and return to your talking points, and sometimes doing that can make you look like you are avoiding a tough question because you don't have a good answer for it. Ultimately, this will be your judgment call. The best advice is, even when you are deflecting, try your best to appear to answer the question. Then lead back to your home turf (message) with a phrase like, "I think what's really important here is..." When in doubt, be brief; there's nothing wrong with a one-word answer to a stupid question.

## ***Dealing with issues/techniques the interviewer will use to catch you off guard:***

**Bait and switch:** You're told the interview will be about one thing and when you get in there you're hit with something totally different. Or the tone is totally different.

**Good response:** Smile and answer with your talking points. DO NOT ENGAGE. Do not let their (new) agenda throw you off track from your pre-established talking points.

### **Inflammatory language designed to make you overreact:**

Good response: Take a deep breath before you say anything. Then, see if you agree with the premise of the question. THEN answer with your talking points in a

reasonable tone of voice, using your preferred language. Don't take the bait – no matter how rude the interviewer is, YOU are the one who will suffer if you act up during the interview.

If your interview is live or the time is very limited, don't waste all your time arguing semantics; simply use the correct term or phrase and continue. For example, if the interviewer calls you a prostitute, you can say "As a sex worker, I think that..." The time it takes to say "Actually, that word is hurtful. I prefer 'sex worker'" is time you could have spent getting your point across. With a print journalist, however, it is totally worth taking the time to explain these nuances.

**Combative Interviewer:** The reporter says, "You're not answering my question..."

**Good response:** Say, "I understand that it's hard to have a nuanced dialogue on television but it's impossible to answer your question in a soundbite." Then move on to your talking point.

**Interruptions:** The reporter interrupts and keeps interrupting (Bill O'Reilly is the master of this).

**Good response:** Say, "It's really hard to have a conversation when you interrupt me after two sentences. Have you already made up your mind or are you interested in my answers?"

If you are comfortable, you may also try to just keep talking and finish your thought, and even raise the volume of your voice, play the game a little bit (this is a classic Fox News tactic).

## DEALING WITH DIFFERENT FORMATS

### Tips for Still Photos, Film

- If you have long hair, wear it pulled back or up to ensure it doesn't obscure your face.
- Wear solid colors, and avoid white.
- Get a friend to describe your outfit to you and listen carefully to see if any aspects of what you're wearing can be described in a negative way. If you are planning to wear a skirt, sit and walk around in it and see if it rides up more than you're comfortable with.
- Unless instructed to, don't look directly into the camera; look at the reporter.
- Try not to fidget. If you usually play with your hands or tap your feet, have a plan for that (like holding your hands together or crossing your legs).
- Negotiate in advance how you want your identity to be protected – do you want your face blurred? Do you want to be identified as an advocate, not a sex worker? Do you *really* want to do this?

### Tips for Radio, TV

- If you aren't "live," ask for a minute to think about the question. If you have a false start, apologize and start again.
- Remember that in a taped interview a pause will be edited out but an ill-thought-out comment will not.
- For a longer show, try to arrange for two sex workers/advocates to be interviewed. It'll take some of the pressure off you.
- Be prepared for the same question to be asked repeatedly if the reporter doesn't get what she wants – stick with your message.
- When you're done with your point – stop talking! Even if there's an awkward pause. The reporter is relying on you feeling awkward and hopes that you will keep talking and give him more material.

### Tips for Print Journalism

- Do a phone or email interview when possible. If you meet in person then real estate in the article usually goes to describing what you look like.
- Nothing you say is ever really "off the record"; if you don't want to see it in print, don't say it.
- Speaking on background means that what you say can't appear in quotes next to your name, but it can appear in the article, just not in quotes. If you want to speak on background only, say so explicitly.
- Don't get lulled in by a conversation, especially at the end of the session when you think the interview is over. Print journalists are good at making you feel like you're chatting with someone casually.

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS

Journalists are highly competitive by nature and are becoming ever more competitive in today's environment. If you offer solutions to the needs of a working reporter then your message(s) are likely to be part of future articles.

One way to do this is to position yourself as a source/resource.

You can maintain contact with a reporter who you've met on a story, OR you can reach out to reporters.

**Here is how to reach out to reporters and become a source:**

**1. Find reporters to target for contact.** Do a Google search of the news outlets in your area to see who is covering stories that are in your area of concern.

Write down the reporter's name, outlet, contact info (emails and phone numbers are increasingly available online). Make a list of several recent stories she wrote. Make sure you KNOW what the reporter covers and can talk about those stories. Look for the other outlets that the reporter must also fill in addition to her main job. For example, most reporters also have a blog or podcast in addition to their regular outlets. This means that your story might not get in the paper, but will get onto the blog (making it more likely to get into the paper next time). You will find the various outlets by doing a good search of the reporter's name and making note of the places where that reporter's work appears.

**2. Contact the reporter.** This is a personal contact, not a press release. You're there as a resource, not to preach your own agenda. The goal is to develop a working relationship with a reporter.

Say something like:

I see that you cover a lot of stories about ((name your issue)). I'd like to be a resource. I belong to an organization that works to end the climate of hate and stigma that surrounds individuals in the sex trade. I've been a sex worker. I can be a source for you or help you find people to personalize your coverage. Here is my contact information. (Make sure to use a cell number that you check OFTEN during the day.)

Send out multiple emails. Many will go unanswered. First contact individual reporters. If you get no answer, call the outlet and ask for the names/contact info for the assignment editor. Send emails to the various assignment editors. If you get no answer there, ask for a name/contact info for the editor. Do not be

discouraged – this is a numbers game and you are cold-calling. You will eventually find someone who will contact you back.

**3. When the reporter contacts you.** The first contact is the most important. Respond immediately and ask the questions from earlier in the package, i.e. what is your need? what's the deadline? etc. If the reporter doesn't need you for a story immediately but makes contact, that means he is willing to use you as a source/resource. Ask where and how you can be useful. Don't exaggerate or lie about what you can deliver, but work to deliver what the reporter is looking for. You now also have a reporter who will pay attention to your call/email. Send him an email offering any story BEFORE you send out a press release or offer it to another reporter. Periodically send short, informational emails about new developments in this area.

**4. PAY ATTENTION to your reporters.** Put a Google alert on their names and read the stories they write. Develop a rapport and relationship. When the reporter does a series or a high profile report, even if it's not in your area, send a quick email saying, "congratulations on your series." Even while you're doing this, make sure that you always remember that the reporter is not a personal friend; you are cultivating a contact for mutual benefit.

**5. When you have a story idea, pitch it to your reporter first.** Tell her that you're offering it to her first because of your relationship. Make sure the reporter knows that you've got a deadline (24 – 48 hours) and you'll offer it to other reporters after that.

# COMMON PROBLEMS AND SNAPPY RESPONSES

## **Reporters almost always default to using female pronouns and assume that people in the sex trades are cisgender women.**

You can correct them by addressing this directly if they start talking about “women this and women that” by saying something like, “Actually, it’s a myth that only cisgender women trade sex.” The other way you can do this is by rolling it into a bigger point and saying “people in the sex industry – and that includes cisgender and transgender men and women, as well as gender nonconforming individuals – [then continue on with your point].” Avoid the phrase “male, female, and transgender sex workers” – this sets up trans women and men as an “other” instead of being inclusive.

## **Don’t automatically agree with the premise/framing of the question.**

This puts you on the defensive and you’re playing by their rules. Question the premise of the question/comment. The following examples demonstrate some ways of dealing with this.

## **Why don’t you get legitimate work/a real job?**

I don’t agree with your premise that sex work is NOT legitimate work. There are lots of jobs that are physical or intimate in nature – like working construction or being a home attendant - but no one is saying that these jobs are not ‘legitimate’ or are somehow immoral or shameful.

## **ANY question about human trafficking, sex slavery, child prostitution, or sex exploitation by force.**

I’m glad you brought that up. Those issues have to do with labor exploitation and child abuse more than the particular industry that people are forced to work in. And this exploitation is already ILLEGAL. I am coming at this issue from a rights-based perspective, and I am absolutely against human trafficking and exploitation in ANY industry.

According to the annual Trafficking in Persons report released by the US State Department, human trafficking occurs in agriculture, construction, the garment industry, restaurants, and domestic work – in addition to the sex trade.

I don’t see anyone advocating the abolition of all of those industries. When this argument is applied to sex work, it’s simply a tool that is used to inflame people against sex work.

Sex workers and advocates for our rights are against ALL TYPES of non-consensual forced labor, regardless of the industry.



### **Prostitution is illegal.**

You're right it is. Now, let's look at the reality of how that current legal fact impacts people.

First, the laws don't work. It hasn't stopped prostitution, and the number of arrests stays the same pretty much every year. Keeping many aspects of the sex trade illegal creates more opportunities for the most marginalized among us to be exploited. When we are viewed as criminals, we do not have legal recourse when we experience violence and exploitation.

### **Prostitution (and other sex work) is just 'wrong.'**

Really? By whose standards? Who decides the issues of morality between consenting adults? You?

People – not just prostitutes – have sex for many reasons. Sometimes, for some of us, one reason is money.

Is it different if I have sex with my boss for a job? What about if I have sex after you pay for dinner and a show? What about the person who marries for money? What about marriage for social standing?

Aren't these examples of the consensual exchange of something for something?

Where do you draw the line? Currently, the line is drawn at money for sexual service. But that is an arbitrary line and hasn't EVER stopped the exchange.

It's time to decriminalize prostitution. Laws are not static. At one time it was illegal for blacks to marry whites or gays to kiss in public, or for groups of workers to unionize. At one time, women didn't have the right to vote. Legislation can be changed. It's time to change this.

### **Prostitution is dehumanizing.**

Really? Why? I don't agree with the unstated premise of your statement.

Men are exploited for physical attributes in professional sports – used for big money while healthy and then cut from the team when hurt. Is that exploitive and dehumanizing? People in Hollywood are paid for their physical attributes that include youth. Look at the female Hollywood stars who bemoan the lack of roles for women over the age of 40. Is that dehumanizing? Some people consider factory work dehumanizing.

### **All sex workers are victims.**

This kind of illogical and inaccurate label trivializes true issues and problems that some sex workers face.

People enter sex work for individual reasons – and their reasons and backgrounds are as varied as they are.

Yes, there are people with a history of abuse, mental health, or addiction issues. But “some” does not mean “all,” and these broad-brush generalities are inaccurate.

For example, studies show that lawyers have an alcoholism rate that is higher than the national average, but people do not extrapolate that to say ALL lawyers are alcoholics.

**Prostitutes ruin themselves for other relationships.**

Really? Why do you say that? Is the same true for day care workers? If someone takes care of other people’s children all day, does she somehow have “less” to give her own kids? I don’t agree with your premise. Sex work is not for everyone, but neither is ANY job.

## AFTER THE STORY:

### When You Love It

This is pretty straightforward: if you like a story that you participated in, tell the journalist so, and if you have access to them, tell the editor or the journalist's supervisor. Also, tell the internet! Link to the piece and refer other people to it. If you read a story that you didn't participate in and you like it, think of it as an opportunity to make a connection with a journalist who could be a good contact in the future. Write the journalist a brief email with a few specific compliments about what they did well in the piece. You can also introduce yourself and say you'd be happy to be a source in future stories. Another way to express your appreciation for an article in a newspaper is to write a letter to the editor that mentions your relationship to the subject and one detail that was good about the piece, i.e. "As a sex worker, I appreciated the complex portrayal of the subjects..."

**How to  
Follow Up  
When You  
Love or Hate  
the Story**

### When You Hate It

Sadly, this is much more common. When you hate a piece that you or members of your community were portrayed in, you need to make a distinction between portrayals that are inaccurate but merely annoying and portrayals that are downright harmful.

Portrayals that are annoying (i.e. use of slang or puns, sexualized descriptions) are often a characteristic of particular media outlets' treatment of their subjects, and though they are worth pointing out to the journalist or editor and definitely worth writing a letter to the editor about, they are usually not things that the outlet will change after the fact by offering a correction. Remember that headlines (which are almost always annoying) are never written by the journalist and always written by the editor. Complaining about a headline usually isn't worth your time.

Portrayals that put subjects at risk of harm (i.e. identifying information when a subject was supposed to have his identity concealed) should be taken very seriously and a correction or retraction should be swiftly pursued. You may also wish to put the journalist or outlet on your black list and not have further contact with her.

Your first contact to request a correction or retraction should be with the journalist who interviewed you. You should explain, in writing, what your problems with the piece are. You must be concrete – this is not about how you feel, this is about concrete ways the piece is harmful to people in the sex trade and how the journalist can fix it. If you are unsatisfied with the journalist's response – including if she says that the editor made final changes that she had no control over (which is often true but the journalist still needs to be held accountable when her byline is on it) – it's time to go to her editor. Make sure you contact the editor of the appropriate section, forward your previous

correspondence, and make your ask. Common asks include: removing identifying information, correcting incorrect information, removing (retracting) details or incorrect information and editing the piece in the online archive, and publishing a correction. For ethical reasons, all newspapers have an “ombudsman,” a person who is responsible for overseeing the ethics of the news outlet, particularly when it comes to journalists’ interactions with sources.

## **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

Hopefully, you've been inspired by the ideas and tactics in this guide, and you feel more prepared for interacting with journalists and media outlets.

If you would like to adapt parts of this guide to fit your needs, please email us at **[info@redumbrellaproject.org](mailto:info@redumbrellaproject.org)**

Likewise, if there are subjects we didn't cover or aspects of media work that you would like more information on, please do get in touch.

Please check out our trainings, publications, events, and other resources at **[redumbrellaproject.org](http://redumbrellaproject.org)**