

## **Press & Publications**

### **Using Media Tools for Museum Advocacy**

#### **General Guidelines**

Working with mainstream media is a great way to reach a wide audience to convey your museum's mission, and to demonstrate the way current events and civic issues intersect with your organization. While some of these techniques can also be useful in outreach to local cable channels or other video coverage, this guide focuses primarily on working with print/online media outlets such as local and regional newspapers, and on the print tool primarily used for advocacy, the "Opinions" section of the paper, including Letters to the Editor, Op-Ed pieces, and even official editorials.

The best guide is experience: read the letters and op-eds that have been published recently in your local media outlets! This is the best way to get a sense of what you need to include to get the editors' attention. It also will give you a good idea what's on the minds of the people in your community, which is always useful.

For all submissions to a media outlet, it is important to follow these guidelines or you risk your submission being tossed without being considered for publication:

1. Keep your letter or article concise, timely, and relevant to the audience of the outlet you're submitting to. Smaller publications are more likely to have fewer submissions and therefore may be more likely to publish yours, but only if you're talking to their readers specifically.
2. Make sure to follow the specific submission guidelines (wordcount, contact method, formatting) that each media outlet requires, or risk it getting tossed unread.
3. Where possible, refer to other recent articles from the same publication on the same topic.
4. Only submit images if you have permission to share them and if the guidelines allow for them. Images are more likely to be welcome with an op-ed than with a letter to the editor.
5. Include a call to action.
6. Remember your audience: the general public may or may not be familiar with your organization and its mission or interests. Be clear, avoid jargon, and talk about how what you care about impacts them, and therefore why they should care too.

### **Does print media still matter?**

Yes. While many readers now consume their journalism online, respected and long-lasting media outlets are still important regardless of whether readers are on paper or on screen. Social media, including Facebook and Twitter, are also useful tools for rebroadcasting from mainstream sources, and local sites such as your town's "Patch" or similar news aggregators will often pick up stories from larger news sites as well.

Also, the opinions section of any news outlet is often one of the most read areas, not only by the general public but also by your local elected officials. Legislative staffers and similar public servants keep a close eye on the opinions expressed in these channels as an indicator of current public sentiments.

### **Letter to the Editor: What, When, and How?**

A letter to the editor is an extremely brief (usually under 300 words) paragraph response to current news coverage. It may react to the topic, or the way the issue was covered by the article, and should include:

1. what prompted you to write/what your relationship to the issue is,
2. what you feel has been missed or needs to be emphasized, with one or two supporting details or pieces of evidence (a good statistic or counter example here can be helpful),
3. a call to action,
4. your real name, professional credentials if relevant, contact information, and location.

Letters to the editor, especially for daily publications, go by very fast! Do not dawdle if you read an article that you feel merits a response; the turnaround time for letters is very, very short. With publications that release on a slower schedule (weekly, monthly, quarterly) you have more time than with a large daily paper.

- A good example to read: "Mass. is rich with smaller, local museums. Let's support them." by Brian Boyles, *Boston Globe* <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/10/23/opinion/mass-is-rich-with-smaller-local-museums-lets-support-them/?p1=BGSearch Overlay Results>

### **Op-Ed: What, When, and How?**

Op-Eds (so named for their traditional place on the page opposite the editorials) are kin to the five-paragraph persuasive essay you may have learned to write in middle school. They present an argument, have multiple pieces of evidence to support that case, and finish with a call to action that re-states and makes urgent the original argument. This is

a good space to draw attention to an issue you feel strongly about, that has not received journalistic attention. It is not as dry as a press release, and not as informal as a blog post, but in-between. Aim for an attention-getting opening sentence or paragraph, use emotional appeal supported by strong facts, and make sure that by the end, your readers know what they can do to further the cause you are advocating for.

As with letters to the editor, timeliness, attention to guidelines (especially wordcount), and relevance are key. Unlike letters to the editor, this format allows for a broader scope of argument and support: statistics, quotes, and other research material fits in a way that letters generally do not have space for. However, brevity is still important; think about a nice concise exhibit label, rather than a catalog research article. Supporting images, where appropriate, may be useful to include here as well.

- A good example to read: “Wanted: A home for Boston history,” by Jim Vrabel, *Commonwealth Magazine* <https://commonwealthmagazine.org/opinion/wanted-a-home-for-boston-history/>

### **What to do once you’re published? Leverage it!**

If you do get your letter or op-ed in print, make sure you share it! Boost your impact on that time invested, and share it over social media, in donor and member communications, on your website, in annual reports, etc. Don’t be shy, and encourage other staff members to share it across departments and with the board as well.

### **When is a press release better?**

If you are advertising a civic engagement program, such as a forum or debate among candidates hosted at your organization, or if you have benefited from a recent government-funded grant, etc. those are good topics for a press release which you can hope will get picked up by your local media outlets. The exception to this case would be if your organization wants to advocate for further funding for say, a state cultural council, and want to use your experience as a grantee as evidence. Then, an opinion piece would be appropriate.

### **Building relationships with local media: articles and editorials**

Sometimes, your opinion piece will bring up aspects of an issue that have not been covered by other articles on the topic. Sometimes, your opinion piece will therefore get the attention of reporters or the editorial board, and lead to further coverage. This is a really good thing!

If you, or anyone on your team has an existing relationship with one or more journalists, columnists, or editors on the local press, that of course is very important to helping your story get more attention. If you do not have connections yet, it's never too late to start! This guide is not designed to show you how to reach out to local news outlets specifically for relationship building, but here are a few tips:

- Writers/anchors/podcasters/etc. need stories! Give them your best ones; good details, personal impact and interest, compelling numbers or quotes, broader context. This is where any impact statements you may have created could be a really useful addition to any press release or introductory email you send. See NEMA's template on how to get started here: [https://nemanet.org/files/8816/3715/5911/Bigger\\_Impact\\_Advocacy\\_Toolkit2.pdf](https://nemanet.org/files/8816/3715/5911/Bigger_Impact_Advocacy_Toolkit2.pdf)
- Keep in touch: don't add people to your newsletter without their permission, but do forward your latest with a personal note at the top once you've established contact.
- Invite them personally and specifically to your events, don't just send a press release and hope they turn up.
- **Rebroadcast any coverage you do get** and give the writers credit on social media, your website, etc. A little gratitude goes a long way to making sure people think of you kindly and are more willing to cover your organization and important issues in future.

## Further Resources

- List of newspapers in the US by state and territory (Wikipedia): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_newspapers\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States#By\\_state\\_and\\_territory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_newspapers_in_the_United_States#By_state_and_territory)
- How to write an op-ed or column (Harvard Kennedy School): [https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/new\\_seglin\\_how\\_to\\_write\\_an\\_oped\\_1\\_25\\_17\\_7.pdf](https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/new_seglin_how_to_write_an_oped_1_25_17_7.pdf)
- How to write an op-ed (The Learning Agency): <https://www.the-learning-agency.com/insights/write-an-op-ed/>