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**SUBJECT:** Public Issues Educators and the News Media  
(Lesson Plan to supplement pages 41-43)

**CONCEPT:** The news media are most people's primary source of information about public issues. The media offer opportunities for increased understanding—or misunderstanding—of public issues. Because they reach large and diverse audiences, the media can be an important resource for public issues educators. Remember: you can't control the media (so don't try), but you can guide the message. Consider this an opportunity to build bridges between educators and newswriters.

**LEARNER OBJECTIVES:** At the completion of this lesson, learners will be able to:

1. Understand how the media work and what reporters want.
2. Identify three strategies for building positive relationships with the media.
3. Anticipate media needs for controversial issue coverage.

**BEFORE PRESENTING THIS MATERIAL:**

1. Review pages 41-43 in *Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues*.
2. Review and duplicate excerpts from June Brotherton's "Controversial Issues: Working with the Media to Present the Facts."
3. Select a news article about a contentious public issue. Prepare your own handout as a "List of Facts" about the issue(s) in the article, (Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How) **AND/OR** a photocopy of the entire article, **OR** compile recent newspapers for participants to use for an activity.
4. Contact one or more media personnel to serve as an expert or a panel of experts to help with inservice education. Carefully explain your goals -- e.g., balanced education on public issues, bringing sound information to bear, enabling people on different sides of the issue to understand one another and look for solutions they can live with.

**MEETING AGENDA FOR MATERIAL PRESENTATION:**

1. Introduction: Have each participant, in one or two sentences, state how they feel about working with the media.
2. Working with the media. Use Brotherton handout or a panel of experts made up of newspaper, television, and/or radio reporters, extension media staff and/or journalism professor to discuss the media environment and standard operating procedures; how they work; what they do and why they do it that way; and what their advise is for people who want to work with them more effectively.

3. Distribute "List of Facts" and ask participants to write a 200 word story. Then compare their writings with the actual news story about the same facts, or have a local reporter or other newswriter critique the stories. Ask the newswriter how they would have written it differently. Discuss the differences and similarities in the way newswriters and educators would write a story and what each is trying to accomplish.

**OR**

Distribute the photocopy of the selected news article **OR** actual newspapers. Have participants find the facts, then analyze what the facts represent..the who, what, when, where, why of the story. Ask, "What made this/these a newsworthy story?" Based on Brotherton example and explanation of "news holes," would you say your newspaper article(s) is/are about an issue that is starting, is a major issue, is stalling and going nowhere for a period of time, or is dying out of the picture?

(ALTERNATIVE EXERCISE)

An alternative to writing a news story is being interviewed about an issue in front of a camera and then watching and critiquing the videotape. This was done recently in the North Carolina Natural Resources Leadership Institute. A case study of a controversial issue was presented, and learners worked in small groups with each group representing a different set of players in the issue—environmentalists, developers, landowners, government regulators, etc. Each group was to decide on its three main "communication points" that they wanted to make to the news media. Each group picked a spokesperson who was then interviewed on camera by a TV reporter. (In reality, the interviewer was from the university communications department, but it might be possible to get actual local reporters to do it). The interviews were videotaped and then played back and critiqued—How well did you do in getting your communication points across? This was a very good skill-building exercise. (Obviously, it could be done as radio or newspaper interviews as well as TV.) The "critique" could then be followed by discussion of questions such as:

- How would the media use interviews like these?
- What would you expect to see on the evening news?
- Would that coverage help move the issue toward resolution or lead to further polarization?
- What could be done differently to enhance the likelihood of constructive outcomes?

## CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: WORKING WITH THE MEDIA TO PRESENT THE FACTS

June M. Brotherton, Assistant to the Chancellor  
North Carolina State University  
(Excerpts from selected sections)

### WHAT MAKES AN ISSUE CONTROVERSIAL?

The same thing that makes it news, or newsworthy.

#### What is news?

- ◆ a timely, accurate and current report of the facts surrounding an event
- ◆ judged by standard called "news value"

#### Components of News

##### 1. timeliness

- ◆ something that has just happened
- ◆ timely in terms of its being seasonal in nature
- ◆ a news story is timely when a majority of readers are in need of the information – localness or proximity
- ◆ news that originates within the media's viewing or circulation area
- ◆ news from other areas if it is relevant or important to readers or viewers

##### 2. prominence or importance

- ◆ crucial word is "big"
- ◆ what the event means to an audience, how big the event is in the community or the effects of a project; prominence, status or standing of a particular individual

##### 3. conflict or consequence

- ◆ struggles of people against their environment, or against one another, individually or in groups

##### 4. progress or change

- ◆ changes brought about by humankind that are beneficial, resulting in:
  - ◆ new technology
  - ◆ sophisticated production methods
  - ◆ modern equipment
  - ◆ better living conditions
  - ◆ improved human relations
- ◆ detrimental changes that result in problems like:
  - ◆ soil erosion
  - ◆ energy wastefulness
  - ◆ water and air pollution

### 5. unusualness

- ◆ anything out of the ordinary, rare, odd or sometimes unforeseen ideas, events or situations qualify

### 6. human interest

- ◆ ideas, events, or situations that touch human emotions
- ◆ human interest stories arouse curiosity, incite anger, elicit fear, joy, sadness, compassion or other feelings
- ◆ people are interested in other people—especially children and senior citizens – and in animals

## WHAT TECHNIQUES CAN YOU USE TO ANTICIPATE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

- Environmental Scanning
- Issues Management

### ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING

- ◆ ◆ If an issue "sneaks" up on you, you haven't been paying attention to signals around you.
- ◆ ◆ Environmental scanning helps you pick up those signals by monitoring sources of information—from civic club discussions to country store meetings to county commission meetings and more.
- ◆ ◆ However, environmental scanning can be an expensive, time-consuming management tool because it must be done on a weekly or monthly basis.
- ◆ ◆ A simpler way to do environmental scanning is to use the "news hole" method.

### WHAT IS THE "NEWS HOLE" METHOD?

1. **Look at your daily and weekly newspapers.** Take a particular look at the front page of the national section (dailies) and the front page of your local news (dailies and weekly).
2. For any front page, there will be a **maximum of ten lead articles or 10 "news holes."** "News holes" are generally filled with those news stories that address the most pressing issues facing the nation, state, county or town/city. Secondary "news holes" for developing issues can be found on pages two and three of the local, state and/or national sections.
3. News media (TV, radio, and newspaper) tend to be **very accurate barometers of those issues that are of increasing public interest.**
4. If you monitor, on a regular basis, those stories going into the "news holes" of your newspapers, you will find that **a pattern will emerge.** Stories that start out as a short article on an upcoming county commission meeting will spawn an informational article about an upcoming issue during the meeting. Once the meeting has occurred, another article will follow outlining local government response to the issue, and perhaps the politics of the issue. If citizens are concerned, another article may follow which outlines and elaborates on those

concerns. This may be followed by a response from governmental officials to those concerns. This may be followed by letters to the editor from citizens or an editorial. Then an in-depth research piece may follow.

5. By monitoring news holes, you can **tell when an issue starts, when government, citizens and the media consider it important, and basically predict a time frame for it either becoming a major issue, stalling in the public process and going nowhere for a period of time, or dying out of the picture.**
6. You can then **determine what action you need to take** to educate the public about the controversial issue . . . we'll talk more about that later.

## EXAMPLE OF A NEWS HOLE

### The Charlotte Observer

September 9 "Martha Hale's Beautiful Necklace: A Catawba River Treasure We must Protect for Future Generations," Editorial Page Comment by Rich Oppel, Editor - announces conference on the future of the Catawba River Lakes, Oct. 11

September 15 "Environmental Justice." Letter to the Editor from citizen

September 16 First of a three-article series entitled, "Troubled Waters."  
"Catawba Choking on Sewage: Treatment Plants Gush Pollution," by David Perlmutter and Ann Doss Helms

"Violations Pile UP; Punishment Lags," by Laura Zelenko

"Unappealing, Not Illegal: Bacteria, Pollutants Found in Tests of Creek Water," by David Perlmutter

"City Plants Rife With Problems," by an Doss Helms and Laura Zelenko

Editorial: "Water Pollution: So What?: If Enforcers Aren't Concerned, Why Should Violators Be?"

September 17 Second of three-article series called, "Troubled Waters" on the Catawba River Lakes.

"Lapses By Private Operators Common: Small Sewage Plants on Honor System, So Punishment Rare," by David Perlmutter and Shirley Hunter Moore

"Regional Plant Could Bail Out Strained System," by David Perlmutter and Laura Zelenko

"Water Watch Pleased with Role," Letter to the Editor

"Catawba Offers A Lot," Letter to the Editor

September 18 Third of three-article series called, "Troubled Waters" on the Catawba River Lakes

"Industry's Chemicals Enter Catawba Unchecked," by Ann Doss Helms

"We Want to Run A Clean Facility: Hickory Firm Upgrades Treatment Plant - Racking Up Violations All the While," by Shirley Hunter Moore

"Take a Swig of the River: There Aren't Many Limits on the Chemicals You're Drinking," by Laura Zelenko

Special Editorial Article, "Protect Our Drinking Ban or Limit Development of Mountain Island Lake," by Barbara Webster, president of the Earth Coalition

## WHERE DO THE MEDIA FIT INTO THE LIFE CYCLE OF AN ISSUE AND WHEN SHOULD YOU GET THEM INVOLVED?

- ◆◆ in short, from the very first
- ◆◆ when you perceive that an issue will develop into one of public interest, you need to start educating the news media about it
- ◆◆ how do you educate the news media before the issue becomes a public one?

1. **Don't always be the "lone ranger"** in trying to educate the news media. Sometimes you can be most effective by staying in the background, educating influential or prominent citizens who have a balanced outlook, and letting them tackle the job of educating the media. These people are sometimes seen as having less of a personal interest than you because you represent an organization, while they are citizens looking out for the good of the community.
2. If an upcoming issue looks as if it will become a controversial one, one way to get assistance in educating the public and the news media about it is to **form a public information/education committee** to help put an educational plan together. Include citizens, influential leaders, business people and news media management. In other words, get your newspaper publisher or your radio station manager involved. In larger cities, this might mean public affairs directors for radio or TV, or newspaper publisher. This will help ensure a media-oriented outlook and some interest in coverage. It also helps ensure more balanced coverage in most instances since the media manager has a stake in a positive outcome. Don't ask reporters to be on these committees—it would be a conflict of interest for them and you want people who have power and influence in the community... managers have it, reporters don't.
3. (Provide) **balanced, factsheets on the issue**. They may not be immediately used, but the media will have them when they need them.
4. (Have) **formal or informal conversations with reporters** you deal with, or with the editors or publishers, particularly if you know them. You may want to request an opportunity to visit with a local paper staff during their staff meeting time to brief them on upcoming or current issues, giving them the most recent information from a research-based institution in that area, or talking about other counties' experiences.
5. If you live in a larger metropolitan area, you may want to **request a visit with the editorial board of your daily newspaper**, not to tell them how they ought to position articles, but to give them factual information on the issue. Make presentations brief, with no editorial or emotion-based comments, and have a brief factsheet or information packet with contact people listed that you can leave with them.
6. **Offer a news media tour, or offer them the names** of people involved who would be willing to talk to them if demonstrations or activities going on in the county can shed light on an issue. For example, if the concern is over animal waste management and you have demonstrations and/or farmers who are dealing with solid waste in an effective and environmentally-sensitive manner, the media may not know about it, so tell them.



7. Don't think only male or only female reporters are the only ones who need education about certain issues. **Don't preach to the converted**—if you are educating the media about animal waste management, don't look only to male reporters or ag reporters friendly to the cause already.
8. Use **weekly columns** you write for local newspapers as an opportunity to educate, or ask your local editor if you can submit a special article for the paper, or a series.
9. **Talk with local radio stations about public affairs programming.** Ask if you can be a guest or bring in experts in the area to talk about the issue. That 15-to-30 minute spot can do a good job educating some segments of the population.
10. In some instances, you may even get a local station to do some **live coverage of an educational meeting or public hearing.**
11. **Ask the news media what they need, and supply it.** Give them a list of contacts and phone numbers so when they get ready to develop an article, they know where to go.
12. **If extension publications already exist that can help educate** a news media person about an issue, use them. Don't however, inundate them; pick the publication that will do the best job for you.
13. **Ask a specialist or specialists to come to your county,** involve key citizens or advisory committee members, sponsor a coffee hour and invite the news media or news media management to it. Make sure the event is focused, presents all sides of the issue, short and to-the-point. To open the event, make a statement of the issue as it is perceived, extension's impartial role in education about the issue, let these citizens voice their concerns about the issue and introduce the specialist for a short presentation. Then, allow them to ask questions and again, offer short, written information and a list of contacts and phone numbers.
14. **Target specific audiences you want to reach** and look for media outlets or other methods of communications that will reach them.
15. **Have an informational meeting on an issue with your county commissioners** or other officials, and invite the media. Attendance is ensured in most cases.
16. **Be available.** Nothing is worse than cultivating a news media person, telling them that you're there to assist them and when the crunch is on. . . you're not around. **Develop a policy among the people who answer your phones** that:
  - a. not only do they take a name and phone number, but they try to find out if the person looking for you is a reporter.
  - b. If so, then they need to find out a little bit about what the reporter wants from you, if the reporter is willing to tell them. They also need to ask the reporter if he/she needs the information quickly due to a deadline.

c. the phone answerer needs to tell them an approximate time you will return, or will be able to return their phone call. If you are not back by the time, the person responsible for your phone messages needs to call back and tell the reporter he/she has not been forgotten, but you have been delayed and will get in touch with them by a certain time the next day.

d. you need to always tell your people where you're going to be and how they can get in touch with you. If it is a media emergency or the reporter is on a tight deadline, and only you can answer the questions, you need to work to be available.

e. if you're going to be out in the field and not reachable by phone, then you need to make arrangements to call in at least once every four hours for messages.

f. again, if you're going to a meeting or on vacation, and you're the only one with the answers, then you need to leave phone numbers where you can be reached, or brief someone in your office on the subject so they can answer questions. There is no excuse for leaving the media high and dry on a controversial issue while you go fishing.

g. don't get irate if a news media person calls you at home. They're doing their job, and if they couldn't find you during the day, or their editor has a last-minute question, they may have to call you at home. Whether we like it or not, public servants don't have a 9-to-5 job.