MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA ADVOCACY TIP SHEET

MEDIA ADVOCACY TIPS

IDENTIFY YOUR TARGETS

For community-led organisations of all sizes, media and social media are powerful tools for strengthening advocacy efforts. Effective media advocacy can raise awareness, sway public opinion, and influence and pressure decision makers, whereas social media can help communicate mission, build communities, inspire action, and share impact.

However, drug user organisations regularly face difficulties in conducting advocacy in the context of mainstream media, which are often hostile to people who use drugs. This can be manifested through stigmatising and pathologising narratives, as well as through a lack of understanding and respect for drug user organisations and their work, mission, and objectives.

This tip sheet is designed to support community-led organisations in conducting effective media and social media advocacy. This is not an exhaustive list, but the strategies proposed may amplify the impact of digital advocacy.

Before pitching a story, conduct preliminary research and read print and online publications you would like to approach. Check by-lines and identify journalists that are supportive of your cause. Then, approach them with a pitch story. Alternatively, you can contact editors at relevant departments.

Blogs and podcasts are excellent platforms to raise awareness of your advocacy campaigns. It can also be easier to establish contact and get coverage compared to larger media outlets, particularly for small and new organisations. You can reach out to bloggers and podcasters via social media channels and propose ideas for collaboration.

Use the full name of the person you approach and not just their job title. This is essential regardless of whether you pitch a story via cold calling at the local level or via email and social media messaging at the national, regional, and global level. By addressing the person you reach out to with their full name, you will indicate you have done your research, which will increase your chances of successfully pitching a story.

Build a database of journalists, editors, bloggers, podcasters, and writers who have authored pieces that support decriminalisation, legalisation, harm reduction, and human rights of people who use drugs. This will allow you to easily identify supportive journalists/writers/media outlets when commencing a campaign or advocacy work or when you are contacted by the media for comment. Additionally, build a database of writers and media outlets that publish stigmatising, pathologising, discriminatory, and pro-war on drugs rhetoric so that you can be forewarned about the potential for poor media reporting and identify outlets with whom it would be counterproductive to engage.

If the person you initially approach is not interested in the story, ask them for a referral to another journalist who covers topics relevant to your pitch story.

PITCH A STORY

Develop a pitch script prior to contacting media. You only have a few moments to capture their interest, so your pitch script should be short, concise, and persuasive. The highlights of an email pitch should be included in the first paragraph, but they can be elaborated upon in the further text. A phone pitch should be no longer than three sentences.

If you approach blog-style media outlets, keep in mind some of them only accept stories via a pitch with a set house style and in accordance with specific parameters (for example, see the guidelines for pitching an article to HuffPost, Vice, and Filter).

Most bloggers and journalists prefer to be pitched via a particular channel – often, this means email, but sometimes, it is a Twitter DM, Instagram, or Facebook message. Nowadays, pitching via phone call is rarely a journalist's preference if previous contact has not been established.

Create a press page on your website that contains the resources you include in your pitch, e.g., press releases and images. You may also wish to add resources, reports,etc., that further support the narrative you want to build. In addition, you can include documents such as language guides (for example, see INPUD and AN-PUD's Words Matter resource) to encourage journalists to adopt respectful and non-stigmatising language in their media coverage. Link to the press page in your pitch email or message, and do not send attachments.

Prepare a one-page sheet that describes the issue and the solution. Make sure that any data you include are accurate and originate from credible sources. Anticipate possible questions and prepare accordingly, e.g., you should ensure you can answer questions such as "why now" or "why does this topic matter".

Have other interview subjects lined up when pitching a story. For example, if you pitch a story about drug consumption rooms, other interview subjects could be a legal professional who can comment on the law, an academic who has researched and analysed data, and a person with lived experience of injecting in a public space. However, the pros and cons of public disclosure of lived experience of drug use should be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis, as it can result in stigma, discrimination, legal issues, and other negative personal and social consequences.

It is important to provide media training, preparation support, debriefing, and ongoing peer support and mentoring for advocates with lived experience who drug user organisations draw on for media advocacy. Training about media advocacy is provided by Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP), International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), and the Rights Reporter Foundation.

PREPARE A MEDIA STATEMENT

Prepare a media statement or press release for your advocacy campaign. Media statement is one of the key media engagement tools for non-profits and community-led organisations and often presents the main source of information for journalists/bloggers' articles, blogs, and reports.

An advocacy-oriented media statement should include:

- A punchy headline that captures the key message;

- An optional subheadline that summarises the second most important point;

- An introductory paragraph that makes a compelling statement about your advocacy project;

- 2–5 further paragraphs (ca. 300–500 words) that provide more information and include a quote from your organisation's lead spokesperson;

- A wrap-up statement that reinforces the key message;

- 1–3 hyperlinks where more detailed information can be found;

- Press contact in your organisation, including their name, job title, and email address;

- A short paragraph (4–5 sentences) with background information about your organisation, including its website's URL address.

BECOME A GO-TO ORGANISATION FOR THE MEDIA

Media coverage is easier to obtain when you have established connections with journalists. This can be achieved when your organisation is perceived as a fast, dependable, and credible source of information.

Establish clear limits in terms of what you are prepared to talk about with the media and what is off limits. When journalists' questions concern the topics you are willing to discuss, ensure you have the answers. If you do not have them, prioritise obtaining the requested information and getting back to them as soon as possible. Journalists operate under tight deadlines, so they will appreciate your responsiveness. This might require some scheduling gymnastics on your side, but it will be worth it, as it will build your organisation's reputation and relationship with the media.

Invest in your digital identity because journalists/writers will look at your online platforms when assessing your organisation's credibility and authority. Make sure you have a solid social media presence and a regularly updated, error-free website that is optimised for ranking high on search engines such as Google.

However, your availability to journalists also needs to be balanced depending on the resources at your organisation's disposal. For example, if your team members work mainly in a voluntary capacity, it is unrealistic to expect responsiveness that matches the demands of global media outlets. If your organisation is very small and just starting out, you should also carefully consider handing out personal email addresses and especially personal cell numbers. If you do not have the capacity for setting up professional (paid) emails, you might wish to consider setting up a separate free email account (e.g., Gmail) that can be shared with the media and, if needed, accessed by several members of your team.

When building relationships with journalists, if you have the capacity, aim to be consistently reachable. Give journalists your professional email and cell phone number, and make it clear that you welcome their enquiries.

TAKE PART IN MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Before an interview, prepare and practice the answers to anticipated questions. You should also develop "sound bites", which are short and easily quotable phrases that capture your message. For video interviews, you can also bring along visual aids, e.g., pop-up display stands with slogans or infographics that help illustrate the point. It is vital for the interviewer to be provided with sufficient background information, so consider sending them your organisation's press kit before the interview.

During a video interview, pay attention to your non-verbal communication: make good eye contact, look alert, show enthusiasm, and smile. If you take part in a video interview with more participants, make sure your body language is appropriate all the time, not just when you are speaking, because the camera can easily zoom in on you anytime.

During an interview, be polite yet assertive, speak clearly and concisely, and do not argue or remain passive. If you take part in a radio-based or verbally recorded interview, pay special attention to clear diction and enunciation to compensate for the lack of visual information, and ensure any head nodding or hand gestures are accompanied by a verbal answer. Consider standing up during an interview – it can make your voice sound more confident and your interactions more energetic. In case of any awkward silence, do not panic – it is the interviewer's responsibility to fill the gaps, not yours.

After an interview, tell the interviewer they can contact you to double-check your quotes. You may also consider asking them to review the piece before it is printed or uploaded online to avoid being misquoted or misrepresented – they may not always agree to do this, but it is worth a try. Even if you do not like or agree with the interviewer, remain professional and respectful.

ORGANISE A PRESS CONFERENCE

If you have a very significant story or launch an important project, consider organising an in-person or online press conference. Appoint a media coordinator, invite journalists well in advance, prepare press kits, and choose a spokesperson who is articulate, charismatic, knowledgeable about the topic, and experienced in interaction with the media. However, this may not always be an option, so if your spokesperson is fairly inexperienced, check out these helpful tips on effective speaking in a press conference.

SOCIAL MEDIA ADVOCACY TIPS

DEVELOP SOCIAL MEDIA POLICIES AND GUIDLINES

CREATE A CONTENT CALENDAR

Community-led organisations often have limited resources allocated for social media management, which is regularly supported by volunteers with varied experience and skill levels. Developing social media policies and guidelines can provide structure, improve clarity, and ensure consistency.

A social media policy should include a directory of team members, roles, and contact information; security protocols; guidance on how staff should behave on their personal social media accounts; and relevant copyright, privacy, and confidentiality laws.

Social media guidelines should include a social media style guide that covers your organisation's tone and voice (e.g., use of jargon and emojis, inclusive language, caption length), as well as consistency, design, and curation guidelines. You can also add social media tips and tricks, links to training opportunities, and procedures for dealing with negative messages.

A content calendar is useful if multiple team members manage your organisation's social media accounts. A content calendar allows you to anticipate key events and schedule the posts in advance across multiple platforms. The timing of your posts is important and should be chosen strategically for each platform while also considering factors such as the location and culture of your audience. By using social media management platforms, you can schedule posts for the whole month (or more) in advance and set different posting times for each platform and post. This should save you time but may require a small monthly fee, although some platforms offer basic free plans; for example, Lightful has a free option for two social media channels for grassroots non-profit organisations, and Buffer offers a free plan for managing up to three accounts. If you have more channels and do not have resources for a paid plan, you may consider posting to all of your social media accounts simultaneously, which can also have a notable impact.

CREATE COMPELLING CONTENT

Too many accounts

Focus on producing compelling content that is relevant to your audience. Posting high-quality original content is key, but consistency is also important, so you should avoid setting up too many accounts and committing to an unrealistic workload beyond available resources. What counts as too many depends on specific circumstances of your organisation but essentially refers to any account that you do not have the capacity to manage regularly (ideally 3–7 times per week, although for small organisations, this may not always be possible). If you can effectively manage only two accounts, consider using Facebook and Twitter. If your capacity increases in the future, you can always add additional channels.

Timely posting

It is vital to post both regularly and in a timely manner. This includes prompt posting about your advocacy actions on your website and social media channels, live streaming and live tweeting of important events, and timely uploading of recordings on the YouTube channel.

Hashtag use

When you run an advocacy campaign, choose a hashtag that captures your message and is easy to remember, then include it in your posts related to the campaign. Good examples of this were INPUD's "Peers in the Pandemic" and EuroNPUD's "Peer Works" Advocacy Campaigns. To increase the reach of your social media posts, tag UN agencies, donors, partners, and executive directors of relevant organisations whenever appropriate. This strategy will allow you to reach beyond your usual networks into other people's networks through the power of social media.

Pre-planning

Pre-planning is essential. For every advocacy action, community-led organisations should provide their members with tip sheets, pre-written messages, talking points, videos, graphics, and information about who to tag. An excellent example of effective pre-planning was INPUD's "Peers in the Pandemic" Advocacy Campaign, which provided members with graphics, videos, examples of advocacy targets and people to tag, and pre-written messages in different languages, which were adaptable to local and national contexts. As a result of effective pre-planning, "Peers in the Pandemic" was INPUD's most successful online campaign by a wide margin, gaining more than 48,000 total impressions on all campaign-related Facebook posts, as well as approximately 400 new followers on Instagram and more than 500 new followers on Twitter.

When sharing personal stories as part of an advocacy campaign, members should be reminded of the potential risks of broadcasting their lived experiences of drug use. For example, in some countries, people can get arrested for drug charges and face stigma and discrimination because of what they say on their podcasts or social media accounts. Disclosure should be carefully considered in light of potential personal, social, and legal consequences.

**Pros and cons
of public disclosure
of lived experience**

PROS

CONS

PROS

- Challenges stigmatising and pathologising narratives
- Deepens connection with like-minded community
- Empowers individuals and challenges internalised stigma
- Improves public understanding of drug use
- May contribute to the de-stigmatisation of drug use
- May support demarginalisation of people who use drugs

CONS

- Risk of stigma and discrimination
- Threat of legal sanctions
- Potential negative impact on current and future employment opportunities
- Risk of exposure to harassment and surveillance
- Risk of social services involvement
- Potential for conflict with loved ones

PRODUCE FRAPHICS, VIDEOS, AND MEMES

Use graphics and videos to increase your social media posts' exposure, engagement, and shareability. They will also help you build a strong visual identity. Additionally, consider the occasional use of memes, which can be a powerful tool to inject a humorous component into your digital advocacy actions. Graphics, videos, and memes offer the opportunity to evoke feelings in your audience and create an emotional bond, which will increase the memorability of your online advocacy projects.

When using graphics, videos, and memes on your social media channels, make sure you comply with copyright laws – these strictly apply also in the social media context. In practice, this may mean producing your own visual content, getting permission to use other's people work (in such cases, make sure you fully credit the source), or sourcing material from royalty-free websites, such as Pexels and Unsplash.

Videos have a particularly strong storytelling capability. Including video content in your social media strategy also means that your organisation has a presence on YouTube, one of the leading search engines in the world, which increases your chances of ranking higher on Google.

FORM PARTNERSHIPS

Working with partners will allow you to reach a new audience and increase engagement, so join forces with like-minded non-profits and donor organisations. Use tags to include partner organisations in your social media posts. Share their posts about their events and advocacy efforts, and ask them to help promote your advocacy actions on their channels. You can also team up with other organisations and co-organise online campaign actions and webinars.

To increase the visibility to the external audiences, explore your options for partnerships with non-profits and community-led organisations in other sectors, journalists and bloggers, political activists, and corporate partners.

ORGANISE ONLINE EVENTS

Social media can be used to host and promote online events, so consider organising a webinar or an advocacy campaign meeting. These events can include presentations, guest speakers, panels, live chat, and fundraising options, and they can be streamed across multiple channels.

Create shareable visuals and videos to promote your online events. For events with an international audience, arrange simultaneous translations in relevant languages on platforms such as Zoom, as this will significantly increase the accessibility for people who do not speak English.

Consider sending out a post-event survey to get honest feedback from speakers and participants. This can help you evaluate what worked and what needs improvement. A survey can also serve as a platform to crowdsource ideas for future events.

INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY OF YOUR CONTENT

If you have an international audience, translate your key messages into the main languages of your audience. You can also set up social media accounts in different languages. However, you should be realistic about whether your organisation's resources allow the management of multiple social media channels in several languages. If not, it is better to stick to having channels in one language and only translate the key messages regarding important events and advocacy campaigns.

If you organise online events and want to make video recordings accessible to a wider audience, provide subtitling in relevant languages and English captioning for the hard of hearing.

MEASURE THE IMPACT

Use social media analytic tools to measure the outcomes of your advocacy efforts. For example, if your goal is to mobilise people to take action, you can measure the impact by the number of times a hashtag was used, online event attendance, or the number of shares. If your primary objective is engagement, focus on responses to your posts, engagement through comments, and social shares.

INVEST IN DIGITAL SECURITY

Invest in digital security training for all your team members, including volunteers. The training should cover the main aspects of cybersecurity and offer clear instructions on using organisation software, emails, passwords, and social media accounts.

Conduct a social media audit regularly (you may find this template useful), and adjust your strategy based on its results. This may mean changing the type of content, the tagging strategy, the timing and frequency of your posts, the topics you focus upon, or the platforms you use.

DIGITAL SECURITY TIPS

- Use unique, complex passwords and multi-factor authentication

- Install anti-virus software and keep it updated

- Set security protocols in writing

- Take advantage of the cloud providers

- Remain vigilant about phishing

- Consider investing in cybersecurity insurance and risk assessment to capture the crucial areas that require protection

If you wish to learn more about digital security, INPUD will soon commence a Digital Security Training Project, which will include online training and the development of visual resources. Please refer to INPUD's website for more information.

INPUD
International Network of People who Use Drugs

ROBERT CARR FUND
for civil society networks