

## Media in collaborative planning

Media, such as newspapers and the internet, can serve two purposes in the course of a collaborative process:

- to broadcast news of your project to the public,
- to help organise and promote the process itself.

The press, by its one-way transfer of information, seems to be more apt to the broadcasting part, while new internet technologies open up possibilities of supporting collaborative processes themselves. Both will be dealt with in this handout.

### Press relations for public communication

When using media to communicate news of a collaborative process, your most important tool is the press release. Other forms of media relations, such as articles for periodicals, interviews and press conferences, will only be touched upon here.

#### HOW TO WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

A press release is a brief statement of news you wish to be published. It is the most important means of communication between those who have news to tell and those who publish it. Every newspaper's editorial department receives a lot of press releases day to day.

Today, press releases are usually sent as **email attachments**, not in printed form. Their length should not exceed one A4 page. Giving your contact data is compulsory, using your organisation's letterhead even better. Further attachments (e.g. photographs) should be listed in the document.

You may always give a **retention period** to tell editors that they must not publish the news before a particular date, if such restrictions should be necessary. This will usually be respected.

Take care of two things when writing a press release:

- Your press release is addressed **to the editor**, not to the public. It is the editor's job to translate it so as to be appealing to a general public. Your task is to appeal to the editor.
- Do **not try** to submit a **complete article** the way you imagine it should run. These things are never published. Newspaper editors insist on doing the writing themselves. If your topic is interesting, they will consult you for more information and probably have an interview with you. Do not suggest an interview. If you have interesting news (and your press release will reveal whether or not), they will come by themselves.

A press release's text consists of three parts: a **headline**, the **first paragraph** and any **subsequent text**.

- The headline is not necessarily what will be printed later. It should primarily arouse the **editor's interest**.
- The first paragraph should **summarize** the information you give and briefly answer the 'five w' questions of
  - **What** happened? (outcome),
  - **Who** acted? (persons involved),
  - **When** was it? (date),
  - **Where** was it? (place),
  - **What** was it like? (short account of events).
- Subsequent paragraphs may **elaborate** the details. Especially, there is a sixth 'w' question of '**why** did it happen?' which should be answered by giving exhaustive background information the editor may or may not use.

This scheme shows that a press release is not a narrative and is not linear in its composition. Instead, it resembles an emergency call on the telephone in that it proceeds **from the general to the particular** rather than from past to current events. That is because editors read from the beginning but shorten from the end, so you will lose information or fail to gain their interest at all if your outcomes, conclusions and most important facts are stated last.

## ARTICLES

With articles you wish to be published in a scientific periodical, you can use more of a narrating style and do the wording yourself, subject only to orthographic and stylistic revision by the paper's editorial department. Most such departments have devised style guides you should consult before finishing your text. Remember to prepare a summary in press-release style, usually both in your native language and English.

## INTERVIEWS

The major rule with interviews is to be on your guard. Not because newspaper people were malicious but because they like to make up stories. You will deliver the keywords and a few quotations to their story, but they will write a lot more, judging by their own impressions. So you and your project should make a good impression. To check the impression you've made, you may always insist on reading the article before it will be published.

## PRESS CONFERENCES

Press conferences are more difficult to organise, but then you can resort to a partner who is nearly always available: In almost every planning process, there is a local public authority involved such as a municipality, county or regional administration. These institutions regularly have media relations departments that can help you prepare a press date.

## The internet, a new means of collaboration?

Human societies, in their development through the past 13,000 years, have regularly evolved from small groups of people through tribes and chiefdoms to centralised states, from flat to hierarchical organisation, which is now the prevailing form of government all over the world. This sequence, American evolutionary biologist Jared Diamond claims,<sup>1</sup> is an inevitable consequence of growing population densities. It is just not possible to summon a plenary meeting of millions of citizens to discuss an issue, so a few will do the discussing on behalf of all others. Human multiplication comes at a price.

Introducing a concept which is often metaphorically referred to as 'global village', the internet promises to partly revert this development by providing the technical means for a prompt and well-organised debate among any community of participants, however numerous and distant from each other. Can the internet keep to this promise?

As for the internet's own affairs, the answer must be 'yes'. Projects such as Wikipedia or the various achievements of open-source software development communities have proven that forms of tribal-like organisation of large 'populations', facilitated by the internet's new communication technologies, do not only work but are actually excellent examples of collaborative work. Some of them have rendered results that can measure up with any effort of centralised governance and business, although they have to struggle with the same plagues as any other human gatherings, such as vandalism and abuse.

But as for a transition to the real world, we are only just at the beginning. Under the keywords of **e-governance** and **e-participation**, concepts of public involvement using the internet are now being tested in many European countries and on all scales of political organisation. Mostly, such internet platforms fulfil two tasks:

- They provide **information** in the shape of texts, pictures and maps explaining the project, if it is a planning project.
- They permit **feedback**, either informally by means of blogs and discussion forums or more formally by permitting users to submit statements or fill in forms that will be evaluated by experts.

However, these services are closer to the participatory than the collaborative approach to involvement in planning. Collaborative planning can still profit from the use of the internet, with a few reservations that should be taken into consideration:

- The anonymity of internet forums has often provoked people to argue more ruthlessly, even to offend others, than they would in personal contact. That is, the internet as a medium does not currently seem to promote a collaborative attitude. This may change as a culture of debate evolves for this medium.

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<sup>1</sup> Diamond, Jared (2005): Guns, Germs and Steel. A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years. Vintage, London, p. 265ff.

- Setting up a participation platform can be expensive, especially if it is to provide GIS (geographic information system) maps which is specialists' work.
- Internet participation platforms make sense if participants are scattered across a large area; they make little sense in small rural environments where meetings of all stakeholders can be held.
- Not all groups of society are equally accustomed to using the internet. Especially elderly people may be excluded from a process relying entirely on the internet. On the other hand, instead of village gatherings, internet-based approach may be more appealing to young people.

This said, a reasonable conclusion would be that participation platforms on today's internet can serve as valuable tools for collaborative processes, especially in **providing information** and **permitting discussions** where participants do not have the chance of personal contact.

It will turn out in the future if and how the positive experience of collaborative work gained on the internet itself can be applied to other realms of society. Tools to do so, such as the **LiquidFeedback** software,<sup>2</sup> are under development but the task seems to be a social rather than a technical one. It should be understood that any such tools cannot replace a collaborative attitude. Establishing such an attitude should have precedence over the use of online tools in a collaborative process.

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<sup>2</sup> LiquidFeedback is a web application developed by a German enterprise and used for internal communication and decision-making by the 2006-founded 'Piratenpartei Deutschland', a German political party strongly related to open-source internet communities. See [http://www.public-software-group.org/liquid\\_feedback](http://www.public-software-group.org/liquid_feedback).