Making Media:
Articles and Text

Pittsburgh Independent Media Center

http://pittsburgh.indymedia.org

Welcome to the Pittsburgh IndyMedia Center's first-ever workshop!

January 18, 2003

We've done our best to make this workshop useful and valuable, including making this book into something you'll keep instead of just tossing when you leave. This book is a resource! If you can't use it, pass it on to somebody else who wants to know how to make media!

This workshop only covers one type of media: writing. But media is not just text! Media is not just a newspaper! Make puppets and paintings and posters and flyers and music and t-shirts and films and audio recordings and photographs. Anything with a message is a form of media, and every person has the right and responsibility to make media.

Workshop Descriptions

Info Gathering: how to go about getting the information you need in order to get the story right and tell it like it is.

Freedom of Information: information on the federal Freedom of Information Act, state Sunshine Laws, and gathering information from local police.

Basics of News Writing: how to construct a story so that people will get the facts and not be left with unanswered questions.

Social Effects of Mass Media: what the concentration of mass media in the hands of corporate powers has done to the news, and why YOU should get involved in making the media yourself!

Workshop Schedule

Welcome & Introduction

10:30 am

Information Gathering

11 am

Session one:

Choose one workshop.

Freedom of Information

11 am

Reconvene for eatin'

12:15 pm

Basics of News Writing

12:45 pm

Session two:

Choose one workshop.

Social Effects of Mass Media

12:45 pm

Ask us anything you want!

1:45 pm

Info Gathering

Some good sources (not just articles, not just people!)

Phone book! Basic info is right there in the yellow pages, divided into helpful categories. Blue pages are particularly helpful:

Allegheny County General Info
412.350.5313
Mayor's Service Center
412.255.2621

Interviews! Ask people very specific, prepared questions (see page 6 for more on interviewing)

Informal Polling! Ask random people a question to get a feel for general attitudes

Directory Action! A phone book of local activist resources

The internet!
www.google.com – an excellent search engine
www.opensecrets.org – get dirt on politicians
www.state.pa.us – info on state taxes, stats, politicians

Articles! Other people did your background research for you and found potential contacts. Libraries archive newspapers on microfilm, and newspapers usually archive stories on the web:

www.post-gazette.com
www.tribune-review.com
www.pghcitypaper.com
www.pittsburgpulp.com
www.nytimes.com

Public libraries! They have hard copy of magazine articles, maps, statistics, librarians, AND people trained to help you find what you need!

Teachers! There are a lot of those in this here college town. University profs AND public school teachers have a wealth of knowledge.

University libraries! If you use computers in the library, you can use FREE connections to HUGE databases of articles and maps other stuff you'd normally have to pay for. The CMU library site (www.library.cmu.edu) has links to:

Congressional Universe: congressional publications, current topics of debate, members and committees, full text of proposed and recent bills, laws and regulations

GenderWatch: full-text articles from 140 international publications plus reports, pamphlets, papers and conference proceedings devoted to women's and gender issues and archival material.

LEXIS-NEXIS Academic Universe: full-text business, legal and general medical/health articles. Has continually updated news items, background information on current issues, company financial information, company and industry news, law reviews, federal case law, accounting and auditing tax information.

Statistical Universe: statistics compiled from federal agencies, private organizations, state governments, and intergovernmental organizations.

Funded Research: information on funding and award histories at leading research facilities, including National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, United States Department of Agriculture, Small Business Innovation Research, and Medical Research Council, UK.

AP Photo Archive: photos from regional, state, national and international news with captions and information including photographer, date and location. Technically there are CMU educational use only terms, but whatever.

Info Gathering

Articles provide a lot of background information, and potential people to talk to. Anyone who's quoted in the article is fair game and can potentially lead you to other sources.

Sample article from http://michiganimc.org/feature/display/945/index.php

Just hours after being sworn in as the state's 47th and first-ever woman governor, Jennifer Granholm called for a meeting with members of water activist group Sweetwater Alliance to discuss the future of water takings by the Ice Mountain Spring Water Company, a division of Nestle Waters North America.

Members of Granholm's transition team approached the group after their sizable presence at the governor's inauguration ceremony.

The bold blue flags of Sweetwater, a now recognizable symbol of citizens' resistance to water privatization in the state, could be seen flying throughout the crowd. Members of the group's Detroit chapter also unfurled a 25-foot banner reading "Stop Ice Mountain" directly in the governor's line of sight.

"It's encouraging to see the new governor's responsiveness, especially on her first day in office," said Jon Keesecker, a Mount Pleasant organizer with Sweetwater Alliance. "But what citizens are looking for is that she act on the positions she took as attorney general. She may have lacked the authority then, but as governor she has the power to do what she recommended the state do almost a year ago: to declare this project illegal and shut Ice Mountain down."

In September 2001, then-state Attorney General Granholm weighed in on the legality of Ice Mountain's bottling operations in Mecosta County in a letter to then-Governor John Engler.

"It is...my view," she wrote in the 2001 letter, "that withdrawing groundwater and bottling it for sale in interstate commerce for use outside the Great Lakes basin constitutes a diversion or export...within the meaning of the federal law."

The 'federal law' cited by Granholm--the 1986 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA)--was designed to give Great Lakes governors and Canadian premiers the power to manage and limit withdrawals and diversions from the Great Lakes Basin for use outside the region. Under WRDA, any one of the Great Lakes governors or premiers can "veto" a proposed withdrawal or diversion once the council of governors and premiers has been convened.
[... cut to save space...]

"Clearly she has made herself a target by weighing in on this issue as attorney general," said Robert Bartle, an organizer with Sweetwater North. "It will be difficult for her not to invoke WRDA and review this project closely now that she has cited it as the governor's responsibility to do so."

"You can be sure that we and thousands of other citizens will be there to make sure she does not neglect her new 'responsibilities'," Bartle said.

Ice Mountain began bottling at a facility near Stanwood, Michigan in May 2002. A lawsuit brought by Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation against Ice Mountain will be heard in May of this year.

Sweetwater Alliance is a direct action human rights group dedicated to the defense and liberation of essential resources from corporate control. For more info, visit Sweetwater on the web at www.waterissweet.org.

What are some good questions to ask, if you were interviewing the mayor? Who else should we talk to for this article to get more than one point of view?

[This is a fictional news brief!]

Mayor Tom Murphy yesterday announced a plan to cut the city's recycling program in an effort to save money and balance Pittsburgh's ailing budget.

"Recycling is all well and good," Murphy explained, "but those trucks don't run on air. Everyone knows fuel prices are up, especially with what's going on in the Middle East, and these are the sort of cuts that we as a city have to make."

Murphy said that the damage inflicted on the environment as a result of this action would mostly be made up for in that the carbon dioxide emissions from the recycling trucks would be eliminated.

City Councilman Sala Udin called the plan "ridiculous," and noted that the recycling program employs more African-American workers than any other city department. He said that the elimination of the program "sets race relations in the city of Pittsburgh back 20 years."

Info Gathering

Interviewing

Don't be shy! Be honest about your purpose. Ask the interviewee how s/he would prefer to be interviewed (email, telephone, in person). Let the interviewee schedule the interview. Try to offer an estimate of how long the interview will take. Try not to interview at the last minute.

During the Interview

Do some background research on the interviewee and their work.

Prepare some questions. This helps guide the interview in the direction you want it to go. It can also help you double-check to make sure you've gotten all the information you need.

Interact with the interviewee. Don't just fire off questions and jot down the answers. Respond!

Let the interviewee set the tone. Usually, it's best not to assume familiarity.

Ask for clarification. If a statement during the interview confuses you, say, "If I understand you . . ." then paraphrase that statement.

Use the interviewee's responses to keep the interview on track. If the interviewee goes off on a tangent, it helps to refer back: "Getting back to what you were saying earlier about..."

Try not to be judgmental: you're likely to get more material than if you react negatively to the interviewee's responses.

Ending and After the Interview

Always ask who else you can talk to, and say thank you!

Go over your notes immediately. After the interview, organize the notes immediately to keep from forgetting anything.

Note-Taking vs. Tape-Recording

Either is fine, and there are pros and cons to each. Remember if you choose to use a tape-recorder make sure you tell the interviewee and that they are comfortable with it. ***You should take notes even if you use a recorder, just in case of disaster.***

Pros of tape-recording:
No need to decipher sloppy notes! And it's harder to misquote people (plus if the person you were talking to later claims they were misquoted you have hard evidence).

Cons of tape-recording:
Technical problems: doesn't record, tape breaks, too much background noise. Tape recording makes some people self-conscious or uncomfortable. Transcribing tapes can be mind-numbingly tedious.

Pros of notes:
No technical problems! Transcribing and arranging notes into an article is usually easier than with tapes.

Cons of notes:
Interviewee talks too fast to keep up. Forgetting what the notes mean.

Info from:
"The Interviewing Conundrum," Kelly Boyer Sagert
"Interview Ettiquette," Moira Allen
San Francisco Indymedia, Sue Sopriano

Freedom of Information

Pennsylvania State Right to Know

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Right to Know laws allow citizens access to the following, among many other things:

Reports, communications or other papers pertaining to safety and health in industrial plants
Records of a conviction for a criminal act
Police payroll records
Settlement agreement in police brutality lawsuit

NOTE: Some of these are not explicitly named in the law, but courts have ruled in favor of them in the past. The state could conceivably deny a request but later be defeated in court.

It has been ruled in the past that police investigative reports are confidential.

Federal Freedom of Information Act

The federal Freedom of Information Act requires federal government agencies to give access to public records to citizens upon request. This includes any information that the government has that is not considered confidential due to privacy laws or "national security." Since the USA-PATRIOT act was passed, the definition of "national security" has become broader and freedom of information is under fire.

FOIA contacts for the different federal departments and agencies can be found online at:
http://www.usdoj.gov/04foia/foiacontacts.htm
Some examples that might be of use:

Defense Contract Management Agency
Cathy Alphin
6350 Walker Lane, Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22310-1453
telephone number: (703) 428-1453
fax number: (703) 428-3580

Department of Transportation
Patricia Riep-Dice
Chief, FOIA Division (C-12/5432)
400 7th Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20590
telephone number: (202) 366-4542
fax number: (202) 366-8536

Environmental Protection Agency
Betty A. Lopez, FOIA Officer
Mail Code 2822T
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460
telephone number: (202) 566-1667
fax number: (202) 566-2147
e-mail address: hq.foia@epamail.epa.gov

Department of Defense
Will Kammer, Directorate for Freedom of Information and Security Review
Room 2C757
1155 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1155
telephone number: (703) 697-1160
fax number: (703) 693-7341
e-mail address: dfoisr@dfoisr.whs.mil

http://www.rcfp.org/foi_lett.html generates FOIA requests for you if you enter the pertinent information, from the Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press, so it's geared toward reporters, which is what, of course, we all are. There's a field where you're supposed to give some sort of proof that the information is going to be published. That's your chance to explain that you as a citizen are also a reporter and plan to use whatever means you're planning to use to disseminate the information. Go get 'em!

Freedom of Information

Sample FoI Request Letter

Agency Head [or Freedom of Information Act Officer]
Name of Agency
Address of Agency
City, State, Zip Code
Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear _____:
This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act.

I request that a copy of the following documents [or documents containing the following information] be provided to me: [identify the documents or information as specifically as possible].
In order to help to determine my status to assess fees, you should know that I am (insert a suitable description of the requester and the purpose of the request).

[Sample requester descriptions:
a representative of the news media affiliated with the _____ newspaper (magazine, television station, etc.), and this request is made as part of news gathering and not for a commercial use.
an individual seeking information for personal use and not for a commercial use.
affiliated with a private corporation and am seeking information for use in the company's business.]

[Optional] I am willing to pay fees for this request up to a maximum of $_____. If you estimate that the fees will exceed this limit, please inform me first.

[Optional] I request a waiver of all fees for this request. Disclosure of the requested information to me is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in my commercial interest. [Include a specific explanation.]

Thank you for your consideration of this request.
Sincerely,
Name
Address
City, State, Zip Code
Telephone number [Optional]

(Courtesy the Freedom of Information Center, Missouri School of Journalism)

Freedom of Information

Right to know!

The City of Pittsburgh's full Right to Know policy can be found online at http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/main/righttoknowpolicy.pdf

You as a citizen of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania have the right to request information about how your tax dollars are being spent by your government, which includes police. Investigative records are generally confidential, but you can request information about cases from the department by contacting one of the public information officers:

Commander Albert Preik (All Police Records)
Right to Know Request
Municipal Courts Building
660 First Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15219
TEL: (412) 255-2948

Tammy Ewin, Public Information Officer (Media Requests)
Police Bureau
100 Grant Street
Public Safety Building
Seventh Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15219
TEL: 412-255-2814
FAX: 412-255-2909

Incident reports (police or fire) cost $15.00, a flat "preparation fee." In other right-to-know cases, costs will vary according to how much needs to be photocopied and whether or not the request is so substantial as to require an employee to be reassigned solely to that request.

Basics of News Writing

Reader Expectations

Independent writing is often dismissed by the general public, because most people are accustomed to a certain type of writing, and they have a certain set of expectations. Some reasons people tend to ignore indie writing:

emotional pleas
non-standard grammar
non-traditional sources
fewer quotes from “experts”

Just because readers are expecting you to sound like everyone else doesn’t mean you have to – but it’s good to be aware of expectations, and who your audience is.

One of the hardest things for people just starting to write is knowing how to *sound* like a journalist. Using a particular tone isn’t necessary by any means, but if you want to sound like a journalist, you just need to know: what you’re going to write, who you’re writing it for, and what order to put things in -- and of course, to make the distinction (for yourself and your readers) between fact and opinion.

Parts of a news story

The pieces don’t necessarily go together in chronological order -- in fact, there’s no set order at all. That’s the kicker: there are no edge pieces to this puzzle!

Lede
New information
Background info
Quotes
Opinions
Facts
Conclusion

Basics of News Writing

Alternative Story Types

First-hand account

common after protests or an individual injustice. Normally writers avoid using first person ("I" or "we") because third person lends a sense of objectivity. But if the story is about what happened to you, there's no reason to write in third person.

News analysis

analyzing the way news has been reported. If three different news sources say three different things, a news analysis tries to find out what the truth is and present that.

Interview

a long interview, back and forth with questions and answers from one person.

News brief/standard story/feature story

these differ in length and content. A brief is (duh) short, and contains only the absolute new, up-to-date information. A standard news story has some background information and the new information, and a feature story includes a lot more personal information about the people in the article and has a less formal tone.

Basics of News Writing

A (non-comprehensive and incomplete) list of qualities of a good article:
info from both points of view
balanced
has new information
enough background information to be helpful and not too much so you don't find the new information
colorful quotes
logical order of information

A (non-comprehensive and incomplete) list of qualities that keep an article from being good:
condescending tone
no background info
only quotes and no new material
blathering!
gaps of information, leaves questions unanswered
basic info is wrong!
new info isn't easy to find (ie, at the top of the article)

Social Effects of Mass Media

David Schultz (in “The cultural contradictions of the American Media, chapter 2 of “It’s Show Time! Media, Politics and Popular Culture”, Lang- 2000) points out four functions of the media that create biases:

The role of the news as a part of democratic society
This is the role that we like to see our press fill- that of the citizen’s friend in a democratic society. This leads media makers to try to find out the truth about elected officials and the government in general, so that the public can make informed decisions.

The corporate structure of news production
News reporting today is business. Megamergers have put the control of the media in the hands of a few corporate monopolies which actively compete with one another for the market. Advertising is where media outlets make their money, so this corporate, private role of the media tends to drive reporting toward issues and viewpoints that will accommodate advertisers.

The entertainment role of the news
News reporting, due in great part to the corporate structure we just discussed, tends to incorporate entertainment a great deal. People expect entertainment rather than simply information when they read the newspaper, and especially when they watch TV. This role leads media outlets to play up stories that are entertaining as more important than stories that might have a more profound effect on the citizens, but lack the punch.

The political role of news media in the greater picture
This refers to the fact that reporters and news media ownership belong to a certain class with certain inherent interests. Schultz’s example, one of the strongest possible, is the issue of telecommunications laws. It is in the interest of the owners of mass media to downplay the dangers of allowing one company to control too much of the mass media. So they don’t publish stories about proposals to limit ownership. Mass media owners essentially are their own lobby to the people of the United States.

Social Effects of Mass Media

Censorship

To censor is “to examine books, films, or other material and to remove or suppress what is considered morally, politically, or otherwise objectionable.” (dictionary.com)

Censorship comes in many forms. It can be perpetrated by governments against people, as in totalitarian regimes (Iraq, China, etc.) It can also be perpetrated by the owners of the press against the people. It’s not acceptable in either form, and because it’s less visible when the ownership is doing the censoring, it can even be argued that this form is more dangerous.

Concrete Example!

These two screenshots offer a perfect example of corporate media censorship. The first shot shows a short story on www.cnn.com about protests outside CNN headquarters. It was captured by a clever internet activist, who then posted the page to another site. This was fortunate, because within a few hours the page was taken down off the CNN website, and the cached image on google.com, which would otherwise preserve the page forever, was taken down at the request of CNN. The second shot shows what happens if you try to go to that page

Social Effects of Mass Media

Future Workshops

The Pittsburgh IndyMedia Center has never done a workshop like this before! We want to put together a series of workshops, but there's a reason we did the writing workshop first: that's what we know about.

This is a call to people who know about video, audio, and photo! Please get involved with the IMC and help us put together a workshop about other types of media!

info@indypgh.org

Pittsburgh IndyMedia Center
PO Box 19038
Pittsburgh PA 15213

What is IndyMedia?

IndyMedia is a global network of hundreds of local autonomous media centers all over the world. Pittsburgh just became an official local IMC in December 2002, and is rolling steadily along. The point of IMCs is to allow other voices to be heard in the media, instead of just those well-paying points of view.

Mission Statement:

The Pittsburgh Independent Media Center is a voluntary collective dedicated to serving the local community with a system for disseminating print and online news. Our coverage is the issues and events ignored by mainstream media, and also those issues that mainstream media covers with the inherent bias of a news organization run as a business. We believe that the job of disseminating information does not belong to a privileged class of reporters and editors, but to everyone. It is our duty as citizens to act as journalists so that the public knows the truth in every instance, not just when the truth is to our political and economic rulers' advantage. We seek to be an inclusive organization which will grow as a community, and not as a hierarchy.

pittsburgh.indymedia.org or www.indypgh.org

info@indypgh.org

If you'd like to get involved in the IndyMedia Center, we would love to have you! There are lots of ways to get involved: directly posting content to the site, posting events to the calendar, coming to meetings [which are posted on the calendar], helping maintain the website, making and putting up flyers, working on The Wrench (our sporadically published print edition) – if you're interested, please talk to one of us or email info@indypgh.org. We are not exclusive! There's a place for everyone!

How to Publish!

1. Go to http://pittsburgh.indymedia.org/publish.php

2. Fill in the fields that say “required” on the page. You don’t have to worry about the other fields. But fill in:

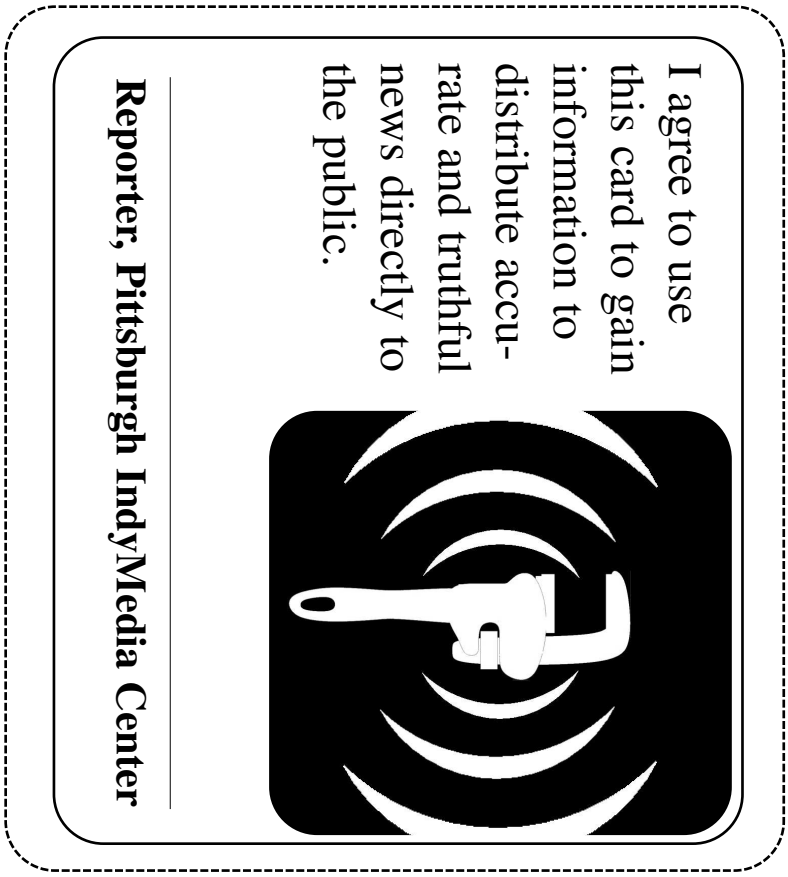
Title: Give your story a name!
Author/Producer: Your name. If you don’t feel comfortable using your real name, use a nom de plume!
Summary: This is a brief description of your story. For example, “Mayor Tom Murphy announced yesterday that he is planning on cutting the city’s recycling program.”

***We recommend using the email validation option. If you check the box below the **Email** field, you’ll be sent an automatic email with a link in it. If you click that link when you check your mail, your post to Indymedia will be validated, so people know that nobody’s impersonating you.

3. Enter the text of your story! If your story is long, a good idea would be to type it into a text program on your computer like Notepad first and save it, then copy and paste it into the right field, in case something happens to the web page when you try to publish. You don’t want to have to type it all over again!

4. If you have photos or audio or video to upload, you can do so at the bottom of the page. But assuming that you’re only publishing a story, you can disregard that and just hit the “Publish!” button. Your story is now published on the internet, on the http://pittsburgh.indymedia.org newswire.

Make Your Own Press Pass



1. Cut out the press pass.

2. Apply a passport-sized photo over the Pittsburgh Indymedia wrench logo (on this side). A glue stick should work marvelously.

3. Sign the card by the statement that you'll only use the pass for distributing the truth to the public.

4. Laminate that sucker. Most places that have copy-making services also do laminating for reasonable prices. One corporate chain of copy centers (rhymes with Pinkos) will charge $1.50. Others may charge slightly more or less.

5. Stick the card into the band of your fedora or visor. Wear oxford shirts with the sleeves rolled up, start smoking, stick a pencil behind your ear, and hang around crime scenes scribbling in a tiny reporter's notebook, while your partner takes pictures using a camera where you have to change the flash bulb every time you take a picture.

Make Your Own Press Pass

This is not an official press pass, and might not get you the access that an official press pass would. However, it is helpful to have something to show people that gives you some credibility and assures them that yes, you are covering a story.

Having an unregistered press pass is a lot like having a business card: it doesn't actually allow you any more rights than you had before, but some people will take you more seriously.