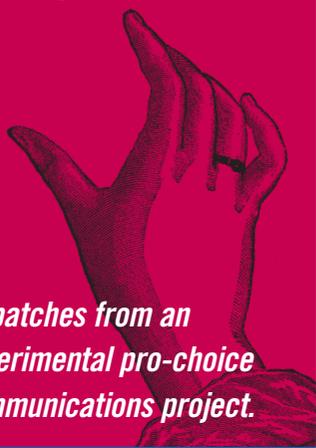


Harvesting the low-hanging fruit & other juicy metaphors:



Dispatches from an experimental pro-choice communications project.

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What's the most difficult part about covering the abortion issue? This question also inspired strong responses. They clustered in three categories:

- #1. Inordinate amount of negative feedback.
- #2. Nothing ever changes.
- #3. The polarization/hyperbole.

How often do groups contact you? Everyone interviewed said the pro-choice side contacted them significantly more than the anti-choice side. Many commented that they heard from pro-choice groups too often.

How helpful are the pro-choice/pro-life groups? When asked to compare both sides in terms of helpfulness and trustworthiness, journalists rated the pro-choice groups higher in all but one instance. However, several also noted that they were skeptical of the factual information coming from both sides.

If you could tell the pro-choice groups how to help you do your job better, what advice would you give? The most prominent trend in these answers was some variation on "give me a new story, I'm bored."

"You need to tell me the new ripple, not the same stuff."

The second most common trend was journalists advising both sides to tone down the spin and hyperbole.

"I have to spend too much time wondering, How am I being spun? It's almost insulting how hyperbolic groups get."

"More information, less manipulation."

In a variation on that theme, several journalists asked groups to stop vilifying the other side.

"Be more respectful of the silent throng who are personally uncomfortable with the idea of abortion."

And finally, several journalists strongly advised groups to be more selective about when they sent press releases or called reporters.

"Certainly if it's important, send me a press release. But if you hit me up every time there's a small issue... you'll lose your chance when it's important."

Resources:

News for a Change: An Advocate's Guide to Working with the Media, by Lawrence Wallack, Katie Woodruff, Lori Dorfman, Iris Diaz.

www.spinproject.org

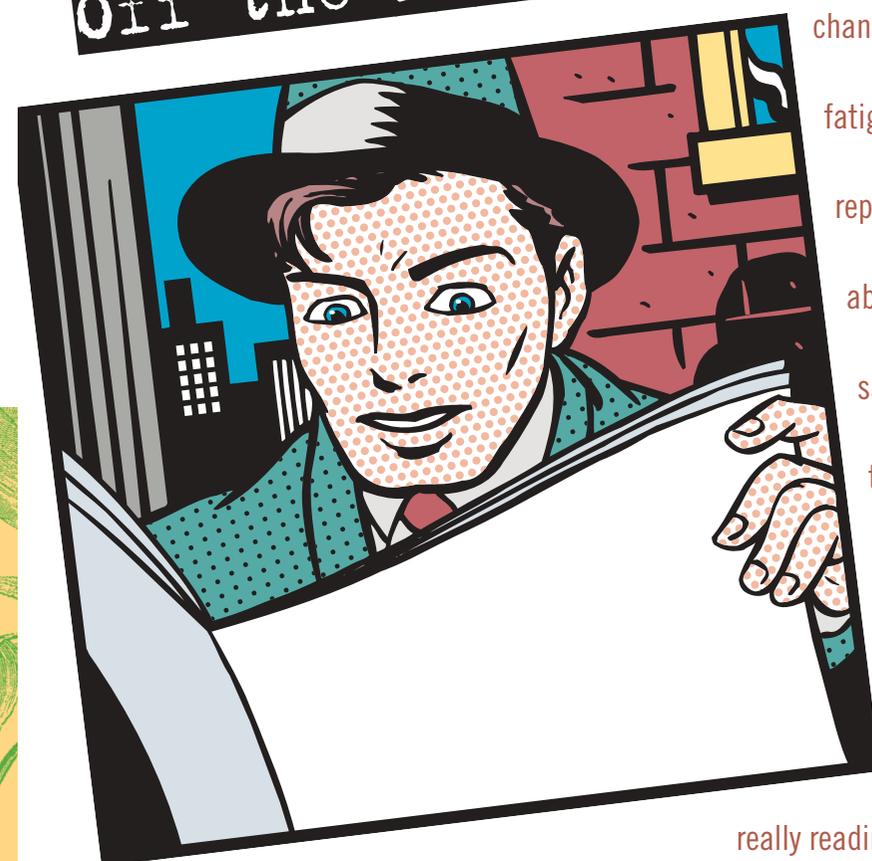
www.fair.org

About This Newsletter:

The *Low-Hanging Fruit* newsletter series is intended to share what was learned from the *New Insights and New Voices* project, an experimental communications project carried out on behalf of pro-choice leadership in Oregon and Washington. The project was lead by Susanne Frank and Tom Novick of M&R Strategic Services, Oregon (www.mrss.com) and funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Please contact Susanne Frank (sfrank@earthlink.net) with questions and comments or to add your name to the email list or to receive print versions of the newsletters.



Strictly Off the Record:



Oregon and Washington Journalists Talk About What It's Like to Cover Reproductive Rights

"One of the things I get tired of is knowing that it's never going to change. We're fatigued. We've reported on abortion the same way for thirty years. And I have to wonder, is anyone really reading this? Aside from the people engaged in the issue? Please, give me something new."



Universally frustrated by infrequent and inaccurate coverage of their issues, pro-choice leaders in the NW had long toyed with the idea of conducting market research on the media. After all, the media are a key target audience. Shouldn't we do what we can to understand their values, attitudes, and needs? The *New Insights and*

New Voices project made it possible to turn that pipedream into a real project.

What 26 reporters and editors in Oregon & Washington had to say when asked about their experiences covering the abortion debate.

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Our basic goal

In 2003/4 Susanne Frank conducted 26 anonymous interviews with reporters and editors from Oregon's and Washington's major print and radio outlets. Our hope was that, by gaining a clearer understanding of how journalists regarded reproductive rights issues and spokespeople, we could help sharpen earned media strategy in the region.

The good, the bad, and the ugly

In this newsletter, we provide only highlights from the findings. If you would like to see the full findings, analysis, and recommendations from this research, email Susanne Frank (sfrank@earthlink.net).

The good news was that, almost without exception, the journalists interviewed respected and trusted pro-choice groups in their region. The bad news was, most of them thought media coverage on this issue did not need to improve and were extremely frustrated and bored by what they regarded as polarized camps fighting the same battle over and over.

"I don't go out of my way to write about it because you can't change people's minds. Neither side is willing to tackle the arguments the other is making."

Why are you a journalist? Answers clustered around three themes: to promote social justice, a desire to learn new things and meet new people, a love of writing.

What's most important about your job? More than half said the most important part of their work was to help people make decisions. Another strong trend was the importance of giving regular people a voice.

"The news has consequences. The news enables people to run their own lives, make decisions about their community."

What's your favorite part? About three-quarters responded that they loved meeting new people, learning new things, and going new places.

As a reporter/editor, what do you think about the issue of abortion?

What comes to mind first? This question garnered a passionate response. Without exception, all the journalists talked about how frustrating it was to cover the abortion debate. Beyond that, answers fell into three main categories.

#1. Nothing ever changes.

"It's a quagmire. Sort of settled. People have pretty much taken sides. It's been out there for so long."

#2. Inordinate amount of negative feedback. Several mentioned that whenever they wrote about anything even loosely related to abortion, they were sure to get angry feedback from one or both sides.

"I get tired of deflecting angry comments. It's hard to maintain a balance... Someone is always going to get angry. It happens every time — more so than other issues. This is the hot button of all hot buttons."

#3. The difficulty of being even-handed.

"I wish it was possible to write more thoughtfully about this debate. When you're on deadline... you boil it down to two sides. It's hard to get to that next step — getting the neutral experts to weigh in, build in context."

How do you think it's handled in the media, in general? A large majority said they thought media coverage was "fair" or "done as well as we cover any other social issue." Most scoffed at the suggestion that coverage was ever unfair or inaccurate. Others mentioned the inherent difficulties.

"It's handled as well as it can be. I think there are so many built-in problems. You end up focusing on the conflict. It's tough to find ways to describe the middle ground."

Is it fair? Accurate? When asked more specifically about fairness and accuracy, most again said they thought coverage was generally fair and accurate. Several also talked about how the anti-choice movement introduces distortion with misleading language and bill names. The difficulty of reporting on so-called 'partial-birth' abortion came up several times.

"Covering so-called 'partial birth,' is hard. The science and legal coverage get confused. And there's pressure from non-science editors to just go with the language of the bill."

“Whatever you write, it gets twisted. You have to give it scrutiny because both sides will be watching so closely. We tread lightly.”