Why use the media?

For campaigners involved with arms trade campaigning, using the local media is a vital part of our work. This may mean writing the occasional letter to the local paper or talking to journalists on a regular basis. Thousands of people may read a local paper; the most ardent door-to-door leafleting cannot reach so many in so short a time. Throughout this guide, we will be using the example of a campaign to stop investment in arms companies by a local council pension fund, in the fictitious town of Cannonville.

Types of media

It is a misconception that only national media counts, local and regional media are important too. More people read each issue of the Manchester Metro, a regional newspaper, than read The Independent. Arguably local media is more important and more noted, as what happens in people’s backyard directly affects their lives.

Regionally, there is a network of TV news centres, with their own nightly programmes, and a large number of local radio stations. Every city and large town has at least one daily paper and often a morning and evening edition or separate publications. Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have their own media, including TV news and daily newspapers.

An important fact about local papers (and regional and local radio and TV) is that they cut across social groups. Your local free paper goes through every door, regardless of age, income, education or politics. Local media also tend to be read, watched or listened to with more attention and to stick in people’s minds more than national media stories. It’s also notable that audiences for “Talk” radio are rising.

Find out how your local media works

Which regional and local newspapers, regional TV programmes and local radio stations cover your area? Look in the yellow pages under Newspapers, Radio and Television. Visit the local library and see what local or regional newspapers they stock. Ask your friends what local media they know of; often parish and
community magazines and the like are easily forgotten. Don’t forget websites either! If you are looking for a relatively inexpensive media directory, then the Guardian Media Directory is recommended.

Media doesn’t just happen; it has to be researched, written or recorded, edited or packaged, and fitted to a schedule for printing or broadcast. Media is manufactured, just like any other artefact we make. If you think creatively how you can fit into this process then you’re more likely to be successful in being included in the media.

**Letter writing**

**Why write letters?**

Most newspapers have letters pages; sometimes radio programmes invite listeners to write letters or emails too.

Writing letters to a newspaper or radio programme is effective because:

- the publication or broadcast reaches a large audience
- the media are often monitored by people we’re trying to influence
- letters can bring up information not addressed in a news item
- letters create an impression of widespread support for, or opposition to issues.

**Good letter writing**

Keep it short and on one subject. Many newspapers have strict limits on the length of letters and have limited space to publish them. Keeping your letter brief will help ensure that your important points are not cut out by the newspaper.

Make it legible. Your letter doesn’t have to be fancy, but you should use a typewriter or computer if your handwriting is difficult to read. Check the spelling and grammar!

Make references to the newspaper. While some papers print general commentary, many will only print letters that refer to a specific article. Include a reference to the article (article title, page and date) in your opening sentence.

Include all your contact details: name, daytime telephone number and address. The letters editor may want to verify the identity of the letter writer by calling them, especially for a letter sent by email. If you are part of a campaign group (e.g. Cannonville CAAT), then write on behalf of the organisation if possible. Organisations bring authority and are representative of more than one person, which may be important in the decision whether or not to publish your letter.

**Some tips on style**

Increase your credibility by mentioning anything that makes you especially qualified to write on a topic. For instance, “As a resident of Cannonville with a pension from the council, I am affected by the council’s decision to invest in arms firms.” Or, “as a mother,” or, “as a concerned citizen,” or, “as a Christian/Muslim,” etc.

Try to tell readers something they’re not likely to know – such as how arms manufacturers receive massive subsidies from the government – and encourage them to take action (such as writing to the pension trustees), e.g., “I call on all my fellow council pensioners and other citizens who are concerned by this unacceptable situation, to write to the pension trustees to express their concern.”

Keep personal grudges and name-calling out of letters; they’ll hurt your credibility.

Speak affirmatively. Don’t give lip service to arms investment arguments.

**EXAMPLE**

“It’s not true arms companies create well-paid long-term jobs.”

**BETTER**

“Arms companies are more about redundancies than job creation.”

Avoid self-righteous language and exaggeration. Readers may dismiss arguments if they feel preached to, accused of something bad, or if the author sounds hysterical. As a campaigner, you want the weight of public opinion on your side and therefore must avoid anything which is likely to alienate. After you write a letter, why not try reading it to a few friends or relatives before you send it and ask how it sounds to them? (If they are not involved in your campaign work and therefore neutral, so much the better.) You can use
their opinion to help you change it until it is totally satisfactory. Here is the sort of thing you don’t want to be writing:

EXAMPLE

“Only a rabid, heartless criminal would invest in the council pension fund and inflict further cataclysmic pain and suffering upon the innocent poor of the third world. I say that the councillors responsible must be flung into prison and the key thrown away.”

BETTER

“People concerned about the violence and suffering from armed conflict know that we need to stop the arms trade. One simple way we can do this is to stop subsidising the arms companies with taxpayers’ money, and instead put the council pension fund into sustainable, socially useful investments.”

Don’t assume your audience knows the issues. Don’t indulge in complex, technical jargon. Keep it simple and concise, so that the audience is in a better position to identify with your cause.

EXAMPLE

“The Export Credits Guarantee Department must stop underpinning arms sales to regimes that commit human rights abuses.”

BETTER

“The government subsidises arms exports, often to countries that abuse human rights, by providing cheap insurance for arms companies.”

Inclusive and softer language like the use of “we” also helps your audience identify with you. Here’s an example, showing how to both simplify the language and use inclusive terms.

EXAMPLE

“Selling arms to developing nations results in their healthcare budgets being chronically underfunded.”

BETTER

“We know that if a developing nation is investing tens of millions of pounds in weapons, that’s tens of millions of pounds that can’t be spent on healthcare or schools.”

Use positive suggestions rather than negative commands.

EXAMPLE

“Don’t invest in companies that sell arms. It’ll leave blood on your hands.”

BETTER

“By investing in companies other than arms producers we can enjoy profits that come with a clean conscience.”

Personalise your writing with anecdotes and visual images.

EXAMPLE

“Arms exports wreak a trail of havoc and misery across the globe.”

BETTER

“Having met refugees from war zones around the world and heard their stories, it brought home to me the personal tragedies on a near-unthinkable scale that arms trading leads to.”

Avoid jargon and academic-type terms. If the reader is unlikely to understand technical terms, then don’t use any.

EXAMPLE

“The use of submunition dispensers in conflict zones is a scourge of developing nations through the resultant collateral damage inflicted on the subsistence farming population.”

BETTER

“UK-manufactured cluster bombs often don’t explode, leaving land dangerous to walk on, particularly endangering the lives and limbs of farmers and their families.”

Avoid euphemisms.

EXAMPLE

“I’m between jobs at the moment.”
Example letter

This letter is included as an example of good practice in letter writing. It’s a ‘rebuttal’ to the concern that
investment in arms companies is the only way of delivering the necessary returns for the council’s staff pension
fund.

The letter starts by briefly restating the point of the previous letter/article to remind readers of the issue and
then immediately goes on to provide a positive solution, whilst repeatedly reiterating the negatives of
investment in the arms trade. This letter makes it clear that a moral argument alone should be enough, but
that economically the arms investments are totally unnecessary in terms of financial returns. The letter also
seeks to illustrate that the arms trade is a burden on public finances. It’s worth noting that the members of the
pension fund are not themselves investing in arms manufacturers, the responsibility is firmly placed on the
council.

Dear Editor,

Clean Investment

Simon Doughty asks (Comment, 14 July) how he can be sure of receiving his full pension if the
council is prevented from investing in arms companies. He can rest assured that there are plenty
of profitable business investments which do not have the same appalling consequences as the
arms trade.

An investment portfolio that invests ethically can easily be devised. A recent survey of financial
investment to the end of 2003 shows that a mix of investments that avoid the six major UK arms
manufacturers would deliver similar results compared to one with no ethical investment criteria. Mr
Doughty should also be aware that arms companies generate profits based on war and
oppression. Arms manufactured by UK based arms companies have been used in the bloody
conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor and elsewhere. The United Nations
estimates that 90% of war victims are civilians and that 50% of war victims are children. The arms
trade is reprehensible, and each year the UK arms companies require hundreds of millions of
pounds in public subsidies for their exports.

The human cost alone should be motivation enough for the council to stop investing in arms
companies. A decision by the Council to invest its pension fund ethically would benefit us all, both
at home and those in areas at war or threatened by war.

Sarah Makepeace,
Cannonville Campaign Against Arms Trade,
15 Hope Road,
Cannonville,
CC1 9NS
“I’m an electrician by training but unemployed.”

Criticise the policy, not the newspaper.

“There is no excuse for your pro-arms dealing article.”

“There is no excuse for the Council to invest in arms companies.”

**Radio phone-ins**

Radio phone-ins are an excellent way to get your viewpoint aired. If possible listen to a previous edition of the programme to get an idea of the format, the presenter’s approach, etc.

Most radio stations prefer a caller using a land line and not a mobile phone. When you ring in, you will be answered by a researcher who will want to know what you plan to say and then will either put you on hold until there is a slot or call you back.

Before making your call, jot down what you would like to get across. Once you are on air use your notes to jog your memory, as it is important to ensure you are well briefed, but do not read from a statement/script as this will sound unappealing. Spoken English and written English are different and reading from a written statement can sound ‘wooden’. Don’t expect to be on the radio for very long as the station will probably have many callers.

Consider the audience for a radio programme. A mid-morning radio phone-in might be heard by parents at home with small children or those not out at work during the day, but it could be missed by the local business community. Although your call will be heard by a large audience, you should address the presenter or guests as if you were speaking with them in a normal conversational setting.

The guidelines for letter writing, in terms of ‘framing’ your comments, are also applicable for questions in a phone-in. If you have a personal story and you are particularly affected then you’re more likely to get on.

A phone-in may simply involve a presenter, possibly with a guest, or it may be a studio discussion. Studio discussions usually involve a panel of people who disagree with each other. Your question will be ‘fielded’ to them.

If you get into a discussion with the presenter or a guest then remember the person you are trying to convince is the listener, not the person you are in discussion with. If you feel the presenter is being provocative don’t rise to the bait; it’s not personal, that’s their job, to create ‘good radio’. Take a moment and step back, think about the different ways you could reply and what would sound best for the listener. Don’t keep interrupting the presenter or guest, as this makes for bad radio as it is impossible for the listener to hear two people speaking over each other and may annoy the presenter or editor, who will remove you from the airwaves sharpish! You may feel very passionately about the issues being discussed but you must keep a cool head.

**Working with journalists and newsdesks**

**Who to contact**

The first time you send out a press release (see example on page 6), or organise a newsworthy event, you may not have any media contacts. This is fine. Just call up the switchboard of your local paper or radio station and ask to speak to the newsdesk. There you’ll be able to talk to a journalist and find out a fax number or email address to send a press release to.

Often local media will have journalists who will cover all sorts of stories and they may not have ‘correspondents’ who are dedicated to one particular area, like local government or finance; but other larger media outlets may have them. Over time, you may find that you establish a working relationship with a journalist interested in your work. See that they are kept informed of the events you organise.

Make up a contact list of media outlets with names of journalists and newsdesks and their telephone and fax numbers and e-mail addresses and keep it up to date. But always send a copy of your release to the newsdesk as well as to named contacts. It is always a good idea to establish deadline times for contributions in your local media. It’s quite common to find a newspaper publisher owns several local papers and that they share the same editors and journalists. Often a publisher will have a free local paper and a paid-for weekly paper too.
Example press release

Below is an example of an amended CAAT Manchester press release with annotations that we have added to assist you and numbered notes that were originally included in the release to assist the newspaper’s journalist/editor. The annotations are alphabetically labelled in front of the part of the release they relate to, with the corresponding notes beneath.

**MANCHESTER CAMPAIGN AGAINST ARMS TRADE**
16 Homestead Drive, Salford, Manchester, M11, LX5. Tel: 0161 000 0000 Mob: 07950 000 000

(EMBARGO UNTIL 8am – FRIDAY 8/10/04)

**PRESS RELEASE**

**PENSIONERS PROTEST: MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL’S PENSION FUND INVESTS IN MERCHANTS OF DEATH**

(Photograph: Outside the Co-operative Insurance Building, Corner of Corporation Street/Miller Street, Manchester, 11:00am, 8/10/04) About a dozen supporters of Manchester Campaign Against Arms Trade with banners and placards will protest against arms investments by the local council pension fund. Retired pensioners drawing on the council’s pension fund will also be present, holding their pension books aloft.

Manchester Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) will protest (from 9.30am until 11.00am) outside the Greater Manchester Pension Fund’s Forum for its retired members on Friday 8th October 2004 at the Co-operative Insurance Building, Corner of Corporation Street/Miller Street, Manchester. Protestors are calling for the pension fund to end its investments in arms companies.

Greater Manchester Pension Fund invests in arms companies, both in the UK and overseas. As a result, Greater Manchester Councillors and their representatives on the fund’s board are effectively endorsing the exports of arms to conflict zones and poor countries. Fund members and local council taxpayers are also being unwittingly dragged into the moral black hole by these unethical investments. The Councillors and Trustees demonstrate their lack of ethics by ignoring the consequences of arms exports to countries in areas of conflict or tension such as Israel and Middle Eastern countries; to countries with records of human rights abuses such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia and to countries with overwhelming development needs such as India and South Africa. The Fund’s investments have also profited from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mike Kavanagh, Manchester CAAT Contact, said, (D) “Arms exports fuel conflict, undermine development and endorse human rights abuses. Greater Manchester needs to wake up to its links to and thereby its endorsement of these exports through the Greater Manchester Pension Fund. It is particularly ironic that the fund represents public workers who daily strive to enhance the well-being of the communities they work in.”

Members of the council pension fund will be asked to sign a petition calling for an end to such investments and be given a leaflet showing the weapons they had unwittingly invested in.

ENDS

Contact Manchester CAAT: 0161 000 0000 Mobile: 07950 000 000
During the next year, Manchester CAAT will protest outside each Town Hall in Greater Manchester to inform Council Tax payers, fund members and councillors of their links to arms exports through the Fund’s investments, and collect signatures for the petition.

**Notes for Editors**

A campaign website has been set up at [www.greatermanchesterpensionfund.org.uk](http://www.greatermanchesterpensionfund.org.uk) that shows why arms exports are unacceptable and also illustrates some of the arms the Fund currently invests in – Apache helicopters, Scorpion tanks, F16s etc.

1/ Research by CAAT indicates that in 2004 Greater Manchester Pension Fund had investments in BAE Systems, Rolls Royce, Smiths Group and Alvis. In 2002, the fund admitted it had investments in United Technologies and General Electric – US arms companies which are the ninth and twenty-eighth largest arms companies in the world. Campaign Against Arms Trade has details of the number of shares for each UK company held by GMPF on its website (www.caat.org.uk), see Clean Investment Campaign section.

2/ Greater Manchester Council Tax funds the employers’ contribution to the fund and Council Tax payers are responsible for any shortfall in the fund. Councillors are responsible for the management of the Fund via representatives on the Pension Fund Management Panel. See [www.gmpf.org.uk](http://www.gmpf.org.uk) for more details.

3/ The fund represents all Greater Manchester local authority employees – Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan – Greater Manchester Fire Brigade, Police and Probation service, and such smaller bodies as Catholic Children’s Rescue Society, Citizens Advice Bureaux, Rochdale Racial Equality Council, Oldham Disability Alliance etc. See the Fund’s website [www.gmpf.org.uk](http://www.gmpf.org.uk) and its Annual Report P38 to P42 for the range of organisations linked to the Fund.
What do they want?

The media wants news. But what is news, you ask? There is no good definition, but there are some obvious elements. For a start, it helps if your “news” is in fact new, although politicians get very good at dressing last month’s announcement in new clothes. A brief flick through the UK press or TV/radio would confirm that controversy, novelty, celebrity, conflict/violence, sex, shock, are all characteristics that make a story more attractive in terms of editorial priorities of the newspaper, radio or TV station. For us arms trade campaigners, although we are probably unable to excite media interest on the same level as the latest goings-on in Eastenders, arms are controversial and often associated with war and human rights abuses.

Meeting their deadlines

Every media organisation works to deadlines and you need to know what they are. Your local weekly paper may go to press on Wednesday lunchtime. If so, get your story there by Monday morning or even by Friday the week before. Don’t ring at 2pm on Wednesday and expect to hear them cheerily call ‘hold the front page!’ Even local papers that come out on the same day and are owned by the same company, can have different deadline times.

Your local radio station probably has a morning news programme from around 7am to 9am and an afternoon one from around 4pm until 6pm. Get the story to them with at least 24 hours notice if possible.

If you are holding a demonstration at an evening council meeting and you want to keep it quiet, ‘embargo’ your story for a suitable time to make the afternoon/early evening news. An embargo is a date and/or time, put on the top of your press release, that clearly indicates when you want the release to be used. For example, if you are issuing a press release to coincide with a press conference where you are making an important announcement, you do not want it being reported in the local paper three days before it occurs, as that will ruin the surprise element and mean that media interest is not maximised. Furthermore, without an embargo date the media will tend to want to publish as soon as possible to beat other competing media and ensure that what they publish is ‘new’.

Human interest

Make the story relevant to its audience. Editors will not be interested in anything that may just make people “switch off” due to the news content having no relevance to their lives.

For example, your press release says: “The Council makes contributions to its pension fund obligatory, so staff can’t opt out if they don’t like the companies in which the pension fund invests. Furthermore public money from Council tax and other sources is used to pay for Council salaries and pension contributions. It’s unfair for our taxes to unwittingly fund the arms trade through the Council pension fund in this way – public money should be invested ethically.”

The above paragraph makes the case for the Council in plain language but won’t it be more interesting if 89 year old pensioner and ex-council employee Vera Lambert, who saw service in World War II, and her six year old great granddaughter Jennifer were demonstrating outside the Council? They hold a placard against Vera’s pension being invested in arms companies. Of course Vera has a thermos of tea and biscuits to comfort her and offer to Councillors willing to stop and talk.

Controversy

‘Council Leader refuses to meet with arms campaigners’ – rows are often news and local politicians are public figures. Councillors all agreeing with each other is not as good a story as one involving bitter divisions and controversy.

Pictures

The newspaper can take a photo of Sarah Makepeace and other campaigners outside the Council meeting with banners and placards undertaking a demonstration. A simple ‘photo-call’ or ‘photo-opportunity’ like this is likely to be enough to raise the local media’s interest. Notice how many of your local paper’s photographs feature people, including children, most if not all of them. Colour and imaginative demonstrations with costumes and props will also help to bring your event to life.

Opinions are not news

Give the news organisation the news, then comment on it. We may disapprove of the Council investing in arms companies, but this opinion really only becomes news when we organise an event, or do something. A gathering or demonstration outside a Council meeting with local residents, aggrieved council pensioners, local businesses and campaigners is an event. Or alternatively how about songs for ethical and peaceful
investments by a choral group outside the Council building? Use your imagination. Of course, if the newspaper or radio station rings to ask your group’s opinion on something – and we actually do have an opinion – by all means give a snappy quote or do a quick radio interview.

Make sure you can be contacted, particularly if your name appears on a press release. If possible, give them a home and work number, and/or a pager/mobile phone. If you get a media message on your answer phone return it in good time. There is nothing more frustrating for a journalist than to be unable to contact key sources before deadline.

**How do we give the news to them?**

Media organisations get their news from many sources, including news agencies, forward news planners, and the courts. But a key source is press releases.

To a campaign group, these are a literary form as vital as the novel. You must know how to write them. Media outlets get hundreds or even thousands of press releases. They are sifted at the rate of one every few seconds. Most go onto the dreaded “spike” and are never seen by a living soul again. Your group’s press releases must avoid this terrible fate at all costs. (Incidentally, owing to health and safety concerns, spikes are, of course, no longer used.)

**Press release**

**Using a press release: Four stages**

(See example press release on pages 6–7)

**a) Write the release**

Make up a template press release onto which details can be written. Create a logo and put it along with the name of your group and contact details at the top. Use the words “Press Release” in large writing. Use headed paper. Put the page number on each page of your release, in bold and in the form Page N of X. Press releases should be one side of A4, two sides maximum.

**b) Send it out**

Send your press release by both fax and e-mail if possible, and even by post when appropriate. The more ways you send it, the more chance there is that someone appropriate will read it! One further and handy addition to this is to also send out the release to your local MP and councillor/s. This will enable them to keep you in mind and will alert them to the issue as well.

**c) Follow up**

Your brilliant press release has gone to all your contacts. Now you need to follow it up. You must ring all your contacts to make sure they have received the release, and to ask if there is anything else they wish to know.

Ringing up media folk in this way may make you feel like a door to door toothbrush rep, but there is no alternative and persistence will pay off. Media organisations are chaotic, and things get lost. When the newsdesk says “Never seen it before”, they may even be telling the truth. So send it again. Your contact details are on the release so they can always call back if they wish to know more about it.

**d) Record media contacts**

You’re phoned by media outlets using the contact details on the press release. What do you do?

You record the details in your ‘media log book’. This is a blank hardback notebook, available from most stationers, that you use to log journalists’ calls. Divide each page into three columns: date of contact, media outlet name and details – name of caller, their contact details, what they said, etc.

Periodically the media organisation’s contact details can be transferred into your ‘media contact book’. The media contact book is a hardback address book with A-Z tabs that you use solely for campaign media contacts. Given the importance of individual personal contacts your media contact and log books are essential tools for future media work.
Interviews

Your release may inspire requests for both radio and TV interviews.

Television interviews

Recorded TV interviews (by far the most common kind) tend to be very short – they may use a clip as short as ten to twenty seconds. So be brief and incisive with your answers.

While the camera operator is setting up the equipment, ask the reporter any questions you want answers to – for example, what will your first question be?

Look at and talk to the reporter, not the camera. If eye contact makes you nervous, fix your gaze two inches over the interviewer’s head. If you stumble with your answer in a recorded interview, stop and ask for the question to be put to you again.

Appear relaxed, confident, and friendly in your body language. The appearance of confidence creates confidence.

Try to suggest a good spot in your building or pick an interesting backdrop for the interview.

Eccentricities of dress or behaviour will distract the viewer. Always look tidy and “ready” for the interview. Try not to fidget, sway or rock from foot to foot.

Radio interviews

Radio interviews are generally short. You may get three minutes or so for the complete interview, enough time to make maybe two main points. Decide what these points are before you do the interview.

Find out if the interview is live or taped. It can be either and this will help you decide how prepared you need to be.

Remember who your audience is for radio interviews. It will be difficult for them to capture every word you say while they are driving in their car or running around the house.

Speak clearly and avoid complicated language that would be difficult for the audience to understand. As for everything else discussed in this guide, do not use jargon. Jargon, once again, can be defined as any words or concepts understood only by a particular community. For example, anti-arms trade activists know what is meant by “clean investment”. Most other people don’t. Use simple words to paint a picture and express feeling. You are campaigning because you feel passionately about the issues. Make sure the audience understands this.

If you stumble with your answer in a recorded interview, stop and ask for the question to be put to you again. In a live interview, keep talking or – in exceptional circumstances – ask for the question to be put again.

Remember, anything you say can end up on the air. So if you do not want it repeated, don’t say it.

These are the basic techniques of successful media work. Don’t worry if it doesn’t go smoothly first time. Repetition is the key to success. Keep at it, and the journalists will soon be ringing you. Sometimes they will even call when you haven’t sent them anything at all, just to get a comment on their story, or to see if you have something good coming up. Then you will know you have them hooked.

Conclusion

Remember: be truthful, be helpful and be concise. But there’s no need to be solemn. A good joke may be worth a hundred statistics. Above all, be prepared.

Resource guide

Online resources

There are a number of guides which can be viewed over the internet or downloaded.

www.spinproject.org

A training organisation based in the United States that produces media skills publications for campaigners and activists, a good deal of which is available online, including a set of tutorials.

www.mediatrust.org.uk

The Media Trust, which owns The Community Channel, publishes a number of short online guides to various aspects of media work.

www.tlio.org.uk/pubs

The publications section of The Land is Ours website has a copy of George Monbiot’s ‘Activist Guide to the
Media’. It is a recommended resource written by an experienced activist and media practitioner.

www.seedsforchange.org.uk

Briefings and resources for campaigners including a media guide and training courses.

Books


Using the Media, Maggie Jones, National Council for Voluntary Organisations (www.ncvo-vol.org.uk), 1992
CAAT was set up in 1974 and is a broad coalition of groups and individuals working for the reduction and ultimate abolition of the international arms trade, together with progressive demilitarisation within arms-producing countries.