

Getting the Message Out

Goals

Students learn how the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) managed the media during the Civil Rights Movement, examine marketing and public relations techniques, analyze their own media consumption, and write a press release.

Central Questions

How did Freedom Summer's leaders get their message out? How do organizations do that today? How trustworthy are marketing and PR messages? What can students learn from them about their own communication styles?

Background Information

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, SNCC used press releases, photographs, television spots, brochures, posters, and direct contact with journalists to teach the nation about the struggle against segregation. SNCC depended upon articulate, charismatic, and savvy leaders like Julian Bond, Diane Nash, Stokely Carmichael, James Forman, and Bob Moses, all of whom worked well with the news media. That media consisted of newspaper reporters who took notes on paper, typed stories on typewriters, and sent them to their papers over the telegraph; there were no laptops or smartphones and no Internet. Television was crude, and cameras were expensive and not very portable. No social media existed.

Mary Elizabeth King worked on SNCC's communication team for four years. Her job involved phoning jails when activists were arrested, calling news media to give them stories about the movement, connecting SNCC offices to pass along news, and publishing SNCC's newspaper, *The Student Voice*. She later wrote a short article (excerpted below) explaining how all this was done.

Today, every organization, business and government agency has a marketing and public relations staff, most of whom are trained in psychology and communications skills. Their job is to make the public believe their messages and feel certain emotions. Their messages compete for our attention 24 hours a day from our TVs, radios, computer screens, phones, and billboards.

SNCC's public relations campaign was a great success and focused the nation's attention on Mississippi for much of 1964. Mainstream Americans were shocked at the injustices they saw, and many of them lobbied their representatives in Washington for reform. When Americans all over the country learned about the segregated South, they changed their thinking about race. This helped pressure Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act in July 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in August 1965.

Documents Used in This Lesson:

1. "How We Made the Media Pay Attention" (excerpt) By Mary Elizabeth King.
<http://wihist.org/1FYapQU>
2. "Bombing Won't Halt SNCC Drive," SNCC Press release, from July 9, 1964.
<http://wihist.org/12Gs15A>

How we made the media pay attention

MARY ELIZABETH KING | SEPTEMBER 16, 2011

During the U.S. civil rights movement, Julian Bond and I essentially managed a South-wide information system for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in what we called the “communications shop.” Before me, Dorothy Miller Zellner worked with Julian. (She appears to the left of him, at center, in the photograph above.) To show how important was the public-information function to SNCC, Bond held one of the few titles in our egalitarian organization: Press Secretary.

Our work was to get unreported accounts into news media circuits, recount unfolding stories, and ease the difficulties of working journalists who were trying to cover a complex mobilization. An additional purpose was to provide protection for civil rights workers. A reporter appearing at a jailhouse with pen and pad in hand might be the only intervention that could save the life of an arrested volunteer or staff member, because the sheriff or police would know that with a published news account that an individual was behind bars, they could no longer operate with impunity. The flow of information from our communications office—sharing background and facts from our projects across the southern states—often made it into the regional and national press, and was as significant to our larger objectives such as the organizing of voter registration drives, mounting demonstrations, devising mock ballots, and building alternative political parties.

For the procedures that we created to work, our communications office had to earn credibility as a trustworthy source in the eyes of the national and sometimes international news corps. The reporters, whom we came know personally, were sometimes indifferent, rushing to meet deadlines, or suspicious of being exploited by propagandists. Julian’s natural inclination toward understatement set the tone. We avoided sensationalism, underestimated the numbers of individuals participating in movement activities, and triple-verified any count of atrocities. Even then, we might undercount in order to be safe. We attributed facts to named sources. The style was clear and unembellished with no opinions or value judgments.

Questions

Document 1: “How We Made the Media Pay Attention” (excerpt) by Mary Elizabeth King.

With a partner, read “How We Made the Media Pay Attention.” Agree on answers to the following questions.

1. What does King say was the most important goal for her office? How did they achieve it?
2. Every organization, business, and government agency has people doing work like Mary King describes. List three skills communications workers need to have. Where do people get those skills?
3. Public relations professionals are paid to make us believe and feel certain feelings so that we will act in ways that benefit them. Can you think of an information source that’s not biased in this way?
4. Where do you get your news about the world? Who decides what you should know about and what you should think about it? List three sources you read or watch. How do you tell if a source is trustworthy?

NEWS RELEASE # 61
STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
6 RAYMOND STREET, N.W. July 9, 1964
ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30314

BOMBING WON'T HALT SNCC DRIVE

McCOMB, MISSISSIPPI - Despite three dynamite blasts that rocked a Negro home here July 8 and a history of violence, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) voting and educational project will continue.

Ten voter registration workers in the home at 702 Wall Street here were not seriously injured. One, Curtis Hayes, 22, a SNCC worker, was cut by flying glass. Another, SNCC Mississippi Summer Project Volunteer Dennis Sweeny, 21, of Portland, Oregon, suffered a mild concussion.

Others in the home were SNCC workers George and Freddy Greene, 20 and 19, both from Greenwood, Mississippi; SNCC worker Julius Samstein, 25, of New York City; SNCC worker Jesse Harris, 22, of Jackson, Mississippi; SNCC worker Sherry Everitt, 19, from Pittsburgh, Pa.; CORE worker Pat Walker, from New York City; and summer volunteers Don McCord, 26, of Stafford, Kansas and Clinton Hopson, 26, of Asbury Park, New Jersey.

Samstein, Sweeney, McCord, and Walker are white; the others are Negroes.

Three Negro homes were bombed in McComb on June 23. This small southwest Mississippi town was the site of the first Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee voter registration project in 1961. SNCC worker Bob Moses, now Program Director for the state-wide Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, began work as the first SNCC field worker in August, 1961.

The drive three years ago was met with official resistance and terror tactics from local whites, as is the state-wide drive today.

Moses and other SNCC staff members, including Hayes, who joined the anti-segregation group's staff then, were jailed several times by local law officers. Moses was jailed in nearby Liberty on August 15, 1961, as he accompanied three people to the registrar's office there. On August 29, 1961, he was beaten by the son of Mississippi law officer on a Liberty street.

A local Negro supporter, Herbert Lee, was killed September 25, 1961, by a member of the state legislature, and a witness to that shooting was murdered on February 1, 1964.

The Ku Klux Klan and another racist group, the Americans for Preservation of the White Race (APWR) have begun organizational drives throughout Southwest Mississippi. Arsene Dick, APWR president, says his all-male, all-white group has chapters in 30 Mississippi counties and a membership "in the five figure bracket."

There are more than 15,000 Negroes in Pike County. Fewer than 164 are registered voters.

SNCC now has voter registration workers in each of Mississippi's five Congressional Districts.

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Questions

Document 2: SNCC Press release, “Bombing Won’t Halt SNCC Drive,” July 9, 1964.

Write a press release following the format of the SNCC document about an event that you have witnessed. It could be a basketball game you attended, a car accident you saw in the street, a new policy announced by your school, or anything else that actually happened in your community. Imagine that your press release will be posted on a website or printed in a newspaper.

The questions below will help you gather and arrange the facts before you begin. These are the questions reporters try to answer before they tell a story. Limit your press release to 350 words.

1. What are you describing? Use two or three words: a “public meeting,” a “soccer game.”
2. Who is your target audience? Who are you trying to reach?
3. What’s the main point you want people to remember after reading your press release?
4. Where did it happen? Be specific.
5. When did it happen? Be precise.
6. Who were the principal people involved? How are their names spelled? What roles did they play?
7. What is your attention-getting first sentence?
8. What happened? How and why?