



ourcommunity.com.au



CENTACARE
Catholic Family Services

Mastering the Media: How Communities Can Use the Media to Shape Policy

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 5 June, 2007

Sam Lipski AM

CEO, The Pratt Foundation,
Distinguished thinker, writer, orator and media expert

*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the

**2007 Communities in Control Conference
Convened by
Our Community & Centacare Catholic Family Services**

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the
2007 Communities in Control Conference, Convened by
Our Community & Centacare Catholic Family Services
www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic

I might start by saying something about my four offerings, which I hope will be, in part anyhow, four diversions. Here's what's on offer: A story about a guide to the galaxy; an indispensable book about old media and communities; some thoughts on why there are no equally good books about new online media and communities; and in conclusion some reflections on why media power ain't what it used to be, and why that can be good for communities.

So let's begin with the story. I liked it when I first read it about 25 years ago. I hope it's a story that some of you may remember.

The story is in Douglas Adams' classic *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. It's about how a massive super computer is designed to give the ultimate answer, the absolute answer, the answer that would completely explain God, life, the universe and everything. But the computer takes 7½ million years to do this and by the time the computer delivers the answer everybody's forgotten the question. Nobody remembers the ultimate question, but the ultimate answer that the computer comes up with is 42.

This is amazing. Finally the ultimate answer! So wonderful is the answer that a contest is held to see if anybody can come up with the question. Many profound questions are offered. But the final winner, the ultimate question to which the ultimate answer is 42, is: "How many roads must a man walk down?"

Of course this is the first line of the Bob Dylan song that continues,

*How many roads must a man walk down
Before you can call him a man?
Yes and how many seas must the white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes and how many times must the cannonballs fly
Before they're forever banned?
The answer my friend, is blowing in the wind.
The answer is blowing in the wind.*

I like the *Galaxy* story for many reasons. One of those reasons is how the story continues. You may recall that in that story the super computer, having come up with the answer to everything, is then asked, “Is there a God?” To which it answers, “There is now.”

But I have to say the main reason is I like the story is because it’s about a quest. That search, that journey that lies at the core of the story, follows many paths; well, 42 at least.

It’s also why I’m attracted to conferences with great titles. I mean, think about it – *Communities in Control, From Advocacy to Policy, Communities Driving Change*.

Anyhow, back to the basic question I’m supposed to try and answer: How can communities use the media to shape policy? Let’s break that down a bit.

First, let’s look at the underlying assumption that there is indeed a relationship between media coverage and policy development. And secondly, let’s be clear that when we say policy development, we are referring to policies which at some point require some legislation, guidelines, by-laws, that in turn require enactment by one of the three tiers of government – local, state or federal. My breakdown sounds a bit pedantic I know, but it’s best to spell out what are we talking about.

As for the first assumption that there is indeed a relationship between community advocacy, media coverage, social change and policy, I have to say the evidence of the past 100 years, certainly the past 50 years, not just in Australia, but pretty well everywhere else where you have some free societies (and even in some authoritarian ones, not in totalitarian ones, but even in some authoritarian ones), I think that’s a self-evident proposition.

It’s so self-evident, in fact, that sometimes we take it for granted. Yesterday we heard Jack Munday talking about the green bans in the 1970s. Unless I just phased out at some point, he didn’t say much about the media’s role. But hey, even 35 years ago, the movement he led wouldn’t have got very far without media coverage. Imagine, if you

can, if the builders' labourers had held up those hundreds of concrete pillars and led those hundreds of marchers through Sydney, and no cameras and no reporters had shown up. There would have been no green bans campaign, or it would have made barely an impact.

Put simply, in the past 50 years our kinds of democracies have evolved into what I'd prefer to call 'mediocracies'. If you still wonder about that, imagine how different this election year in Australia would be if there were no television coverage, no reporting of the opinion polls in the print press and no talkback radio. "Ah bliss," you say. But it wouldn't be Australia. And it wouldn't be the democracy that we've created.

So we come to a *but*. It's a very important *but*. While it's often a prerequisite for communities to involve the media in helping to change attitudes and develop those new policies, it's not always a necessary or even a desirable prerequisite. Indeed sometimes the best thing a community group can do when it's mobilising and lobbying for policy change is to literally avoid the media spotlight at all costs. Contrary to what many journalists might argue, the public interest is not always the same as what they say the public is interested in.

But in most cases, yes, used sensibly, the media – and that's an umbrella term if ever there was one – the media can indeed be an ally in social change and policy development.

So back to the question: How do you best use the media? (A bit exploitative, but fair enough – they don't mind being used, provided they get something out of it in return of course.) Let me answer that question by posing some other questions.

Do you have a clear idea why you want to use the media? Do you really understand that the media can be a two-edged sword? You should be careful what you wish for. Have you ever considered the possibility that not only might media coverage run counter to your hopes for policy change, but that it might mis-report, distort your views, or that it might trivialise your concerns?

In short, far more important than learning about the techniques of getting your group into the media, which is an understandable desire, is thinking through the reasons for doing it. You need to be starting with and constantly reviewing the risk management analysis before going ahead with it.

OK, you've done that job – now you're in territory where media guides and media training do matter. Luckily for me quite a few of you attended the workshops at the pre-conference skills day here on Sunday, which I know dealt with some of these problems. For those who didn't go to the workshops, as well as for those who did but want some more guidance, Media Team Australia has done most of the hard work to provide at least the basic answers.

So who are Media Team Australia, you ask? A very impressive group of young women in Canberra established MTA in 2005 as a non-profit to help community organisations take a more professional approach to their media and communications activities. Just two months ago they published *Media on a Shoestring*, a 94-page booklet which is quite simply the best guide of its kind I've ever seen, not just in Australia but anywhere else (and I've seen a few guides to how to get into the media). It's written by the very energetic Executive Director of MTA Annie O'Rourke, and its aim is to help all community organisations, large and small, to tell their stories to a wider audience. And I think it succeeds brilliantly. (What's more, here's a big secret: if there are any people from corporate media and corporate public relations departments here, get hold of this book. It will do you a lot of good as well.)

The book asks you to consider those basic questions I've highlighted, and it suggests how you might actually do that exercise; it talks about going to ground zero and saying, "Why do we even want to get into the media?" But apart from that of course it's full of practical information. It's designed for groups with limited resources which, let's face it, is most community groups. And it has the great merit of having been road-tested with community groups in workshops from Darwin to Hobart, and with senior journalists and communications professionals.

Above all, and for this I bless Annie and her colleagues, it's written in plain English, not managerial socio-babble, policy newspeak or esoteric jargon. I'm grateful beyond measure that it does not use any of the following phrases: "at the end of the day" or "going forward" (especially "going forward"; I hate "going forward" because it invariably means we're really going backward, and I know that because George Orwell told me so).

It's worth noting that the *Shoestring* booklet grew up from MTA's partnership with the Alcoa Foundation, who I'm very pleased to say is also a sponsor of this conference. This non-profit partnership enables me to say something about community groups and business corporations that may not seem related to the media, but really it is.

Perception, image and brand name – now I know that these are marketing terms which quite a few community groups still find difficult to accept, let alone embrace, but they do come with the territory. Being a community group means not only that you've got to try and get your ideas through to a wider audience or to a specific audience, but you have to be competitive. One of the things that community groups are reluctant to admit is that they are competing with other community groups. It doesn't have to be a bad sort of zero sum game exercise, but there is competition out there for resources, for funding and for getting into the media.

There is some interesting research in the United States that has been undertaken by Cone Incorporated, a Boston cause marketing agency, which shows that the American public welcomes partnerships between the business and community sectors. I'm sure many of you will not be surprised to learn that 82% of Americans say they have a more positive image of the business when it joins hands with a non-profit. But interestingly, 76% also have a more positive image of the non-profit when it partners with a company. And if you're still a bit sceptical about that, as many as 70% say they're more likely to donate to a charity once they know it has a corporate or business partner.

Yes, I know Australians aren't Americans – our views on business and non-profits are different, we have a different view about the

relationship between the welfare state and private enterprise and all these things. But here's my hunch: In Australia, as in the United States, a community group, without giving up its identity or its integrity, can find a way to form an alliance with a suitable business. I say a *suitable* business – it doesn't have to be Alcoa, it doesn't have to be a huge corporate, it can be the bus company in your local suburb, and it doesn't always have to be about the business giving cash or money. When that alliance happens and there is a genuine exchange, there's a mutual relationship. Both gain credibility, expertise and standing. It's not a one-way street. It should never be.

That relationship can also really help with the media, and that, I think, provides another way of giving credibility to a community group.

Back to my pitch. You can buy *Shoestring* for \$45 online from www.mediateam.com.au and I can assure you it's \$45 well invested. But wait, there's more! Specifically, MTA's 10 golden rules. I won't repeat all 10 golden rules, they're in the book, but I do want to quote from Rule Number 3, because it's the ultimate answer in the guide to the media galaxy: Know your audience.

To quote from *Shoestring*: "The best campaign in the world will never work if you're targeting it at the wrong people. Never use the general public as a target audience as this is a meaningless phrase. Break it down."

I emphasise "know your audience" because it sounds simple and obvious but if there's one consistent mistake that I find communities make it is that they don't really know which audience and therefore which media. In media coverage some golden rules are more golden than others and that's one of them.

Here endeth the *Shoestring* lesson, and here endeth part two. I've told you a story, I've tried to sell you a book.

For my third offering, I'm going to do a bit of a backflip and try and explain why the book I've just tried to sell you has its limitations – and that's because it deals with old media: television, radio and print. Not

that there's anything wrong with that – some of my best friends still work for old media, although God knows for how long. By using the term 'old media' I'm not meaning to be derogatory and I'm not talking about a chronological thing – 'old' as distinct from 'new' are the terms thrown about to distinguish between technology and delivery platforms.

For all the uncertainty and for all their decline, the old media will still be a significant, if not the main outlet for news about and by communities for a long time ahead, as far as I think we can see – five, 10, 15 years down the track. Ironically the most important reason they'll still maintain their role in the media marketplace is because they'll have to develop – and they're developing rapidly – their own online and multi-media formats. In fact, they'll only survive to the extent that they successfully integrate old and new media.

The fact that all these media changes are happening around us means that there are no guides comparable to *Shoestring* to tell communities how to use the new media – the websites, the email lists, the chat rooms, the bloggers' fields, the You Tube, the My Space, Get Up, Don't Get Up, text messaging, phone videos and whatever the latest thing is this week that by next week will all be old hat.

Of course, that's the problem. The new media are so new, or new enough anyhow, that very few practitioners to have the experience – the real, in-built experience – to write more than a very superficial guide. Even if they have the experience, the chances are that any guide will be out of date by the time it was published (unless, of course, the guide itself is a constantly updated website and blog).

New media is what's happening now. It's happening all over the place. It's happening at warp speed. It's transforming the nature of things like the American presidential elections, not just in the sharing of information and the creation of opinions, but in hard cash terms as a fundraising technique – and let me tell you raising money is a way of changing society. So it's clear, the runs are already on the board. But still it's too fragmented, too fast to allow for what I would call coherent analysis.

All this means, I think, unprecedented opportunities for communities to embrace the new media and so be far less dependent on the old media. Of course *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian* and *The Herald Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph* and so on are still influential newspapers; talkback radio still has its listeners; and millions still watch the current affairs tabloid programs. But all of the old media have lost ground over the past 10 years, and they're going to lose more ground over the next 10. (And they've all dumbbed down in the past 10 years, and they're going to continue to dumb down in the next 10.)

That's not a reason for communities to drop the old media (and old media extends to your suburban newspaper and your local community newsletter as much as it does to *The Saturday Age*). All of these old media are still good, strong assets to keep in mind when you're thinking about social change.

What I am suggesting is that communities have to stop feeling dependent on the old media to get their messages out. There is life without *The Age*, I promise you there is. There is life without the *Sydney Morning Herald*. There's life even without your local suburban papers.

You have to think about what else is available to you that doesn't perhaps call on so many resources, that isn't as expensive, but gives you an alternative and gets you the desirable result.

Which brings me in conclusion to my fourth offering: some reflections on the power of the media and how journalism and journalists are changing.

As with so much that's happened in our world, we've moved from the hierarchical, vertical way of ordering our societies to a much more horizontal, flattened out version. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman writes in his book, *The World is Flat*, about the way the internet has abolished geography and borders when it comes to doing business in a globalised world. I'd apply the same assessment to the

media. The old vertical hierarchies of power and the relationship between journalists, citizens and communities are all flattening out. And I refer to three aspects of that.

Firstly, power is moving away from journalists as gatekeepers who hold the keys to what we know about the world, and it's flowing to the blogs and the websites and the chat rooms. Trying to keep up, the old media have no choice but to go with those multi-media outlets as well as they can. As a result, journalists are facing, and there's no other phrase that I can think of, a crisis of identity. Once, what they basically had to know was how to report and write. And with all the deadlines in the world, even on a daily, they actually had some time to do that. Now time is at a premium, because increasingly, even on suburban newspapers, they have to be multi-skilled, they've got to be working throughout the day on screen and online and there are multiple deadlines. It changes the whole nature of the profession, particularly at the serious end where communities might want to get some of their ideas out in the public debate.

Secondly, citizens, and therefore communities, are reacting because they're increasingly becoming their own news makers, their own reporters, their own editors and their own publishers.

And thirdly, of course, audiences are leaving the old media for the new in droves. The whole idea of the news business and business models for news, they're all up for grabs.

I believe these changes mean that more than ever before, community groups have unprecedented opportunities, to not only find the media coverage that suits them best, but literally to create their own.

This is your time. And this is a new kind of power. The challenge isn't just to use the power but to use it as wisely and as well as you can.

Thank you.

Communities in Control 2007

Proudly presented by



and



With the support of our Alliance Partners:



australia's aluminium



If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2007 Communities in Control Conference, Convened by Our Community & Centacare Catholic Family Services www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic