

The School Newspaper is Not Out to Get Us

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As a community, let's admit it – fraternity and sorority members often like to find excuses and point fingers to blame others for the challenges faced daily and the negative perspectives many people have of fraternities and sororities. No one gets the blame more than the big, bad media. Undergraduate members, inter/national organization staff and volunteers, and campus fraternity and sorority advisors have all been heard blaming movies, news media, and campus media groups for bad reputations and “Greek stereotypes.”

However, just as fraternities and sororities feel that outsiders do not understand what they do or the benefit they bring to campus, most people in the general public have little to no understanding of how media organizations function. It is important to take some time, as professionals and also students in fraternities and sororities, to understand the media, their purpose and how they function.

In working with the media, there are a few standard conventions that lay the groundwork to understanding what they do, why they do it, and how you can work with them:

- **Their purpose is to report the news.** If something happens on campus or related to the campus/community, they have a responsibility to report on it.
- **They want people to read/view their work.** They select stories and create their work with the intention of gaining readers/viewers.
- **Blood, controversy, and oddities sell.** The racier, more shocking an incident, the more press it will receive. Tons of research has been done on what news stories draw in the most readers/viewers, and they find ones about tragedy and controversy as the most followed. Just look at the top news stories. People acting in opposition to their stated values make top news all the time. The incongruence of religious leaders or politicians' words and actions are a common news topic to which readers/viewers are drawn.
- **Student media organizations are staffed by students.** It may seem like common sense, but sometimes students and staff members forget that the editors running media organizations are students and are learning through practice. Just like with fraternity and sorority chapters, mistakes happen and sometimes stories are not as well-researched as they could be. Offer kind, *constructive* criticism with this in mind to improve their craft.
- **Print media (and Twitter) are all based on word counts.** Just like Twitter is limited to 140 characters, print media has a limited space in which to organize headlines, images, and article text. Because of this limited space in headlines, words need to be abbreviated in order to share the topic of the story in the limited space available. This is why the term “frat” is often used in story headlines. When there are less than 35 characters to show the subject of a story and draw in readers, using 10 of those for one word is severely limiting, whereas a four-character word allows for more information in the headline. Lots of techniques are used to squeeze as much information into headlines as possible. This is not an intentional slight to the fraternity and sorority community. Abbreviations are used for other organizations and words (i.e. \$90k vs. \$90 thousand or \$90,000; Gov vs. Governor; GOP/Dems vs. Republicans/Democrats).

Here are few specific things you can do to help your fraternity and sorority members, chapters and councils build a better relationship with your campus media organizations, specifically the student newspaper.

1. Set up a meeting between a few key fraternity/sorority leaders and the leadership of the campus media groups. This can be a very important step in developing a relationship but could easily go south if the groundwork is not laid well. In order to have this meeting as effective as possible, be sure to do the following:
 - Be strategic in who you invite to the meeting. Have an aggressive Panhellenic president or angry fraternity member? They may not be the best people to be open-minded in understanding their peers on the media staff.
 - Define the purpose and expectations of the meeting up front and in writing. Ensure all parties know the meeting is about sharing information and getting to know each other. It is not to accuse anyone of anything or argue about articles that may have been upsetting.
 - Have an impartial facilitator/moderator. Advisors for both organizations and/or a staff member in campus activities may be the best fit for this role. They need to keep the meeting on track and the attitude positive.
 - Have specific questions and items to cover that relate to the purpose. Have each side share their structure and how they function.
 - Be inquisitive and not demanding. Asking "how can we increase the likelihood that our events get covered by the paper?" is a better approach than saying, "you have to start covering fraternity/sorority events."
 - Be certain to ask how much advance notice and information they need before an event to increase likelihood of coverage.
 - Be sure to have all in attendance exchange contact information and discuss a plan for follow-up communication.

It would be great to conduct this meeting every time major leadership on the media groups or councils changes.

2. Help your students understand what is "newsworthy" and what is not. When looking at potential stories, journalists have to keep in mind the characteristics that are proven to appeal to readers:
 - **Proximity** – Is the story located nearby/in the community/on campus? The closer a story is to the site of the media and its audience, the more appealing the story.
 - **Prominence** – Who is involved in the story? Is it someone in a position of power or that people will know? For example a story about an unknown student plagiarizing may not be news, but news that the head of the Creative Writing department plagiarizing would be. The more high profile the subject of the story, the more it appeals to the audience (i.e. Student body president vs. random student; fraternity president vs. general member).
 - **Timeliness** – When did this story take place? The sooner a story runs the better. Everyone wants to be the first to get the story. An event from two weeks ago is old news and would have been better covered earlier.
 - **Human Interest** – Is there some kind of heart-warming aspect to the story? An example of this characteristic is a recent story of the three fraternity brothers who were all selected to donate bone marrow, or a member who created a non-profit organization assisting students in Africa. Heroic actions and significant community service-type actions appeal to the audiences' emotions and are a welcome relief from news typically filled with death and destruction.
 - **Oddity** – Is this unique or a rare occurrence? A great example of this is the 90-year-old woman who joined a sorority in 2011. Once in a lifetime weather and astronomical occurrences also make the news because of this aspect.

- **Impact** – What affect does this have on our community/readers/viewers? Stories covering things that directly impact their audience’s lives draw in more readers. A fraternity alumnus donating a significant amount of money to build a new recreation center has a big impact on the community; a fraternity donating \$50 to a local charity doesn’t have as much of an impact and will not draw readers/viewers.
3. Incorporate discussions about media into the event planning process. As students begin planning large-scale events, ask them when and how they will let campus media groups know about the event.
 4. Teach your students how to write press releases. Effective press releases contain all the information media organizations need to cover a story and show the importance of the event. Press releases are also a great way to share that chapters have won awards or been recognized nationally. Many national organizations already do these for their major awards, so it is just a matter of the students getting those and sharing them with campus media (and your University Relations office as well). Find a helpful template and tips for writing press releases here: <http://www.eng.buffalo.edu/courses/ee402/StudentResources/PressRelease2.html>.
 5. Encourage students to not get upset by the use of “frat” in article headlines, or bash student media, especially not in writing. Getting upset over the little things is a sure way to break down the relationship that could be built between organizations.

No matter how much work you put into building the relationship between the fraternity/sorority community and student media organizations, there is the likelihood of the fraternity/sorority community getting “bad press.” A chapter gets shut down. An organization is accused of breaking the law or other bad behavior. Someone gets hurt at a fraternity/sorority property. It is important to be prepared if and when a negative situation occurs on your campus with a fraternity or sorority. Prepare your students by having a plan and discussing it with them prior to an incident occurring. A few tips to keep the bad press from getting even worse:

- No statements to the media should be made without approval from your national organization (for students/volunteers) or your campus or inter/national organization (staff). This goes for all members, whether or not they make the statement anonymously. If it is shared, there is a possibility it will show up in the story.
- Posts made on social media sites or in comment sections of media websites as well as emails to media staff are all fair game and could be quoted in an article. If they do not want it quoted, do not write it.
- Stealing/destroying copies of a campus newspaper is not only stupid, it is illegal and will make the community/organization look even worse.
- As much as students may want to bash the writer or a negative article, encourage them to refrain from commenting on online articles. Most times, the comments make the community look worse than the article itself and all the increased traffic to the article/page will only contribute to the negative impact.

Finally, one important fact to remember in thinking about limiting “bad press” and avoiding a negative portrayal by the media: **If fraternities/sororities do not do stupid stuff, they do not get negative coverage.** The best way to prevent bad media coverage is to make sure actions are in line with values, and for the most part, they will not be newsworthy in a negative way. Focus on creating a significant positive impact in the

surrounding community and sharing that impact effectively with campus media organizations.

With intentional efforts, fraternities/sororities and the media can get along.