

IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT YOU SAVE THIS MEMO FOR REFERENCE DURING THE SUMMER.

NOTES AND GUIDELINES ON NEWS, PUBLIC RELATIONS  
CORE SOUTHERN REGIONAL OFFICE June, 1965

A great many things will happen this summer - some will be news and some won't. Even of those events that are news, only a portion will be reported by the mass media to any reasonable extent. Our efforts will affect the extent of news coverage, and this memo sets forth some guides to follow to help maximize coverage.

A. What is news - News is basically events and statements by persons whose opinions the news media regard as important. For the most part the civil rights movement speaks by its actions. The statements by movement people, King, Farmer, etc. included, are not as important to news media and the public as they are to us. The statement by the president of a voters league which has never done anything is just about totally unimportant - with the possible exception of a statement that the league that has conducted some significant actions is much more newsworthy - most news worthy when he announces another action - his past successes in having action gives credence to each following statement. Even this man's statements about what's wrong with the Governor, mayor or sheriff are important just about in direct relation to the proven (action) strength of his organization. The news media and the public have not learned to consider the opinions of these men (civil rights workers also) particularly important therefore not newsworthy. News is also the new and the unusual, the unique, distinctive, catchy. The first march, the first restaurant to desegregate, the first meeting between the Mayor and the Negroes is almost always going to be more news than the second of these events. The degree of firstness is geographically relative - its newsworthiness.

The firstness rule is not necessarily absolute - is the 10th church burning more or less news than the first? Is the participation of 50 local whites in a Negro demonstration more or less news than when the first lone white joined? It can go either way. An often heard remark from newsmen in Mississippi last summer was "Oh, it's just another church burning." And before we blame the news media we might note that this was the reaction of many civil rights workers too. Whiteness is also important. All major news media are owned and operated by whites; whites are also about 90% of the population of the country. Those 90% care more about the beating of a white civil rights worker than the beating of any Negro. These are some of the facts of life about the news business that we have learned; not only are they not CORE's values, but in many instances they are values we seek to change.

B. Project procedure. The state office of your project has or will have a department for putting out news information. They can not make up information; they must depend on you for it. Your local project director will direct who is to phone reports to the state office and it is important that his instructions should be followed. All of us, however are news gatherers; any one of us may be the only witness to an incident. When the story gets out, newsmen may call and want to talk to the person who actually saw "it" happen. Also, in various situations any one of us may have to phone news to the state office.

Some guidelines:

1. Get details and be as accurate as possible. Get times, places, (Not "downtown", but "in front of Walgreens"), the full sequence of events,

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and the names, ages, race, and hometown of all "our" people involved. Whenever possible talk with someone who was there and use his name in your reports. CORE worker Tom Jones, Negro 22, from Chicago, said such and such. Be calm and reasonably thorough; it is worth the 10 or 20 min. delay to get the facts. The first word-or-mouth report you get may be that "hundreds" of white men did something, checking may reveal there were only 40. Do report promptly; a 1 day old story is dead for radio, TV and daily papers. Exaggerating (intentionally or not) can blow a good story, and give the whole state project a bad reputation with newsmen and the public. A true story: the night before a big demonstration civil rights workers in a small town phoned their state office that hundreds of white men were gathering in one part of town and that all of them were armed. The observation was accurate. Word got around town and in a few hours a local Negro man informed the workers that it was the regular drill night of the national guard and they were meeting at their regular place. It wasn't until the following morning that the workers informed the state office of the explanation. It was a dangerous rumor in the local area and would have been a very irresponsible story to give to the press. Fortunately, the state office had enough doubts to hold up on the story- but it was a tense situation and they might not have. Be fully accurate.

2. There is bad press too. A newsman does not have to be against us to write something critical or unfavorable. If a reporter interviews people on a demonstration who don't know what they are demonstrating for he is doing his job. Likewise if he can pick up comments from staff and volunteers about the internal problems of CORE or the local movement. Some points to remember:

a. When you talk to a newsman you and he are both "on the job". And a reporter can be the friendliest, most pro-movement guy you ever met- when he's on the job. Unless you are very specific about what is "off the record" don't expect him to know. Most reporters are decent about this but they are not mind readers; one mistake could be very damaging.

b. Do not speak on behalf of the project unless you are authorized. Reporters may want to talk to you because you witnessed something; that's fine but don't go beyond your bounds. Reporters may want to talk to certain people rather than the official spokesman, because of where they are from; that's good too. You should not only remember that you are speaking on behalf of yourself but make sure he knows it too.

c. Don't be shy. If a man presents himself as a reporter or (FBI, etc.) and you are suspicious, ask to see his credentials. Some local newsmen and strangers may not have credentials, you can have the state office check on him. You can also speak strictly on the record; anything you say would be for release anyhow so you couldn't be hurt. If you are suspicious of someone at a closed meeting don't wait until it is half over before asking the project director if he knows who the stranger is. Basically reporters are not deceitful but they won't give up an inside story if no one asks them to leave. If you are suspicious of a phone caller (reporters, FBI, etc.) be pleasant but say you'll have to check on something and that you'll call him back (all reporters will accept collect calls if they know who you are). Before you return the call you can check on him or the phone number. Newsmen do legitimately call from motels, etc., so be reasonable. If still in doubt, again speak strictly on the record.

d. Be polite. Some reporters, may be hostile, and not just local

men. They may disagree with the movement, it may be their way of getting a careless statement from you, or they just may have duty for 14 hours. Always be polite. Getting angry or making a smart remark may make you feel better (temporarily) or feel that you have showed him how militant you are - but, don't do it. At the least; it will antagonize the reporter worse he may print your statement.

e. When even just one reporter is present the world is watching. Use good sense in all manner of things.

C. There are other points to remember also.

1. There are libel and slander laws. CORE has good lawyers but remember the southern courts have never convicted a white man for murdering a Negro. Be very careful when you use names of whites, police officers, etc. in press statements (it's OK to give them to the state project office; they will be careful themselves and should have the report for other purposes). Truth alone is not a defense against such a suit, but if malicious intent is proved you are guilty. If the report is untrue, so much the worse. Whenever possible give a source for your identification and report the news straight, not "Sheriff John P. Manley, who is known to be a vicious man not fit to hold office, hit him." Sheriff Manly may be the worst racist on the face of the earth - all the more reason not to make him rich by letting him get a fat judgement against you or us in court. A CORE chapter in California had to pay a \$40,000 judgement. So be careful.

2. Considerations other than just publicity will affect whether you report incidents to the local police. If there is no reason not to then always do it. In hundreds of incidents during the past year alone it has truthfully been reported that "the sheriff said the incident was not reported to him". Failure to report incidents gives the officials an "out" they don't deserve and looks bad in the news as well. If we report or attempt to report incidents to local police it will help newsmen verify (and thereby enable them to print) what we tell them. And if officials continue their denials it will permit us to say that they are untruthful---in most cases we can't do that at present.

3. Don't ask newsmen to do favors for you, especially to give you information from the "other side" or rides in their cars. Their role is to be neutral. You may ask certain things, "has the sheriff made a public statement about what he is going to do on the restaurant tests?" etc. and in that level you can ask for information. A reporter who shares too many confidences with you may be doing the same thing for the other side.

4. A practical note. Record keeping is important and often neglected. A daily project log can be of great help. In this hectic life it is very easy to forget important details of something that happened only a week ago.

5. A request. Do not restrict your reports to the state office to only newsworthy material. Your state and the southern regional office will be working on public relations projects other than just straight news.

D. The foregoing has had a lot of don'ts. But we also urge that you do a number of things.

1. Do keep in contact with parents, friends and civil rights groups back home. Calls and letters to them, in both tense and normal situations can be very effective. If you tell them what's going on, they can also do fund raising and build general support for the project.

2. In both situations (extratense & just normal) for you to be in direct contact with some hometown news media. In a crisis situation it can sometimes help prevent trouble. Even if things go smoothly a radio station may want to make a phone recording, a paper may want to interview you for a story. It is important both for project discipline and maximum results that your local and state project know what your plans are in this regard. We may be able to send photos of you "in action" on your project to a paper: it would greatly enhance a report you sent in. Telephone recording is too poor for more than a minute or two of air time - satisfactory for a news show, but the same station might welcome a broadcast quality 15 or 30 minute interview with you, which we could also arrange to do. If you write well, an account of your impressions in your first two weeks might be worth sending to a magazine. Let your state public relations department know of your plans. A reporter for the magazine you were going to send it to may have already been else where in your state.

3. You may have additional ideas for publicity, reports, fund raising etc. In fact, every year summer volunteers come up with very good ideas. Just don't act unilaterally; discuss the idea with your project director and the public relations people in your state office or in the southern regional office.