

Simpol



Simpol-UK

The simultaneous policy



Working with the media

It is obvious that gaining media coverage for the Simpol Policy will help to increase awareness and support for the campaign. Working with journalists is most effective when it is appreciated that they are generally working to deadlines with many stories competing for their attention.

Know the media

Pick up a recent copy of a newspaper in your house. If you don't usually read the a newspaper then you will have to buy one specially, realising as you do so that many other people do not read newspapers.

Now think of what would make a good Simpol story. Perhaps a local politician has pledged to implement Simpol. Perhaps you are holding a policy forum. Perhaps Simpol-UK has published a new book showing how Simpol could help to tackle a global problem, such as climate change.

Have a look at the stories in the paper bearing in mind that, for every story in print, there were hundreds or perhaps thousands of press releases with stories that did not gain coverage. What issues are covered in the paper? How does your Simpol story compare? If you were the editor, would you be prepared to drop one of the published stories for the Simpol one?

The aim is to make the answer to this last question be 'yes'.

Try the same exercise with radio, television and internet websites.

Remember that you can speak in the name of Simpol-UK only with the authorization of the organization. Officers of the Local Simpol group can speak in the name of the group without authorization from Simpol-UK subject to the officer's agreement with Simpol.

Competition for media space

Your local media will probably contain many stories similar to those that will arise in the Simpol campaign. The local Member of Parliament has made a pronouncement on a topical issue. There is to be a meeting in the town hall. A book is reviewed.

National media is a tougher nut to crack. Wars, political intrigue, multi-billion dollar deals are filling the space of those news outlets that are not full of celebrity lifestyle and scandal. Campaigns that make it into the news may have the backing of a consortium of household name organisations or celebrities or perhaps an authoritative report with in-depth analysis may have been published by well-known researchers. Tens of thousands of people may have been mobilised in a demonstration – and been rewarded by a photo with one sentence beneath it, badly summarising the issue they are raising.

Look again at the news reports. Articles on climate change, complaints by business leaders about over-regulation, concern about the disengagement of people with politics. Read these articles and you will find a paragraph here or a reference there to a small organisation which you may not have heard about before, but which the journalist has brought into the story. There may be a quote addressing the issue from someone presented as an expert. Could the organisation be Simpol-UK or your local group? Could the quote come from you?

Behind every story there lies a process of work. The easier we make that task, the more likely the journalist will write or speak about Simpol.

Sending out press releases is one way to try to convince journalists to report your stories. But that will be covered later, because there are steps that can be taken before then, particularly if you do not have any strong stories.

React to stories

If you follow the media, you will inevitably start wishing that Simpol had been brought into particular stories. An international meeting has watered down measures on protecting the environment, for example. This shows the need for Simpol! Send a letter to the paper, call the radio station phone-in line, add a comment to the website. As briefly as possible link the issue to Simpol, giving a basic description of what Simpol is about (see example press releases). Your contribution will be read, even if it isn't used. Next time it might be. Letters editors generally publish a selection of letters representative of those they have received. If yours is the tenth comment flagging up the importance of Simpol, then one of them may be published. Don't leave it for someone else to do. Seize the opportunity.

Note which journalist produced the report. In newspapers there will often be an email address. Radio and television websites sometimes give journalists' emails. Send them a comment, welcoming their interest in the issue covered by their piece and explain why it made you think of Simpol. They may never reply, but they may investigate Simpol further.

Some journalists will reply, usually with a very short message. Try to build a relationship, commenting on future articles when relevant and sending them a short message or a press release on the Simpol campaign which you think may interest them. Eventually this may find its way into an article.

Constructing a story

News is rarely a series of facts, unless it's the weather or financial reports. News is more often a story. Something has happened and there is a reason for it. There will be implications. There is perhaps an element of human interest. The news may be part of a bigger picture, providing some insight. It is complex, but the essence can be summarised in a few words and the essential details in a few sentences.

Let us look at an example. Your local Member of Parliament has signed the pledge to implement the Simultaneous Policy alongside other governments. This is news. It is a fact. But it isn't a story. This is a story:

Campaigners are celebrating because the local Member of Parliament has signed a pledge form to implement a package of policies to address global problems, such as climate change, unsustainability and unfair trade, known as the Simultaneous Policy. The local Simultaneous Policy group, which has been campaigning for the past 6 months, received the pledge at a signing ceremony in the market square today (photo). The policy package is being developed by Simpol supporters around the world and is to be implemented simultaneously when all, or sufficient, governments have pledged to do so. The local group coordinator, said:

"This is the 50th pledge signed in the UK and brings us a step nearer to achieving our goal of making support for Simpol government policy".

Cut this down to just the first sentence, and it is still a story, the type that may appear in a news box in your local paper. Thinking how to present your news to the media may prompt ideas. In the above example, holding a signing ceremony creates an event. Events are tied to specific dates and are newsworthy because of that: "...in the market square today." Events also allow for a photograph to illustrate the story.

Build up to the story

Some stories will give you time to prepare. In the example of the local Member of Parliament signing the pledge, you can arrange this a few days before and send out an announcement to the media to encourage them to come to the signing event. A day or two before the event, you can phone the different media outlets and ask to speak with 'forward planning' to confirm they received the announcement and have made an entry in the diary. If there is no 'forward planning' you will normally be put through to the 'news desk'. If you are lucky, the event will have been entered into the diary. More likely, you will be asked to send the announcement again. You can also ask which journalist would be likely to cover the story and ask to be put through so you can provide background information.

If you have been building up a relationship with journalists as explained at the beginning, remember to let them know about the event.

After the event, you could send out a press release about what has happened, perhaps linking to on-line photographs or including a note that photographs can be emailed if wanted. If posting photos on a website, link from the low-resolution image displayed on the web page to a high-resolution image that can be downloaded for printing. Remember you can post news directly on alternative media sites such as www.indymedia.org.uk

Press releases

A press release is not the same as you writing the news story, although often press releases are used with little editing.

Press releases should be written in neutral and factual language. If you wrote: "*Simpol will stop fat-cat business leaders corrupting our political leaders for their own personal gain*" then you will alienate some journalists and give any that wish to write a story more work in changing your words to get their piece past the editor.

A good model for press releases is as follows:

Head it with the words **press release** and the **date of issue**. Or if it is an announcement, put the word **announcement** and the date and time of the event. You can add the words 'photo opportunity' if there will be one.

A title. This is not the headline you would like to see in the newspaper. This is a descriptive heading which conveys as much information as possible. If this is the 20th press release in the fax in-tray, it will be the title which determines whether it will be read or put straight into the recycling.

Opening paragraph. This should provide the essential information. What is happening (or has happened)? Why? Where? Who was involved? When did it happen? The opening paragraph should give enough information by itself. Try to limit the paragraph to a few sentences, each of which adds layers to the story. Ideally, the opening sentence should be able to stand alone.

Subsequent paragraphs. These should expand on the information in the opening paragraph and provide additional background. Again aim to be as concise as possible.

A quote. It is a good idea to include a quote after the first or second paragraph so the journalist can add this to their article and make it appear as if they have gone to the effort of conducting an interview. Quotes are extremely useful for more informal language or controversial information. You could say, for example, "Keen Simpol campaigner, Sylvia Jones, said: *'Simpol will stop fat-cat business leaders...'*"

Contact details. These are essential. Give the Simpol-UK website address or your own group's website address which links to it and a contact telephone number for a named person.

All the above should ideally fit on one side of A4 paper with 12 pt text and gaps between paragraphs. Do not go any smaller than 10 pt text. It is better to remove content than reduce readability.

You can add a second page with 'notes for editors'. These provide more detailed information, which may not be directly relevant for the article, but which you think the editor should know. For example, you might like to give the number of local groups there are in the UK and the countries where National Simultaneous Policy Organisations have been formed.

What happens to a press release

Imagine you work in a busy newsroom. The planning meeting for that day's paper will take place in 15 minutes. You have half-finished an article you have been working on for three days, but need to bring in another angle to complete it. You will have to write another two or three articles before the end of the day. You look at the screen of news wires from the press agencies to see what they are covering. Titles roll up the screen attempting to entice you to read the stories prepared by agency journalists. Is there anything you can bring into your half-finished article? Will any of these stories stand alone and fill some of the other slots? You go to the fax machine and pick up a pile of press releases that have come through.

Passing the diary desk, you glance down to see what has been noted by forward planning. There are 20 press releases and you quickly glance through them.

A title catches your eye. *'A new tactical voting movement claims first victory in European Parliament election'*. Your half finished article is about how less than 50% of people voted in the election. You skip read the release and see immediately what the new strategy is trying to do. There is a great quote. You put the press release into the file for that article and carry on looking through the other press releases.

Or, alternatively, a title catches your eye, not related to your article, but it looks interesting. The first paragraph tells you all you need to know, but you read to the end. Then you pick up your pen and cross out the bottom three paragraphs. You leave the opening paragraph and the quote. With a little bit of editing that is one article slot filled. You carry on looking through the other press releases.

Think of this journalist when you write your press release.

Giving interviews

You may be asked to give an interview. This could be for a radio or television programme or for a newspaper. Some people prefer to do recorded interviews so it doesn't matter if you make a mistake. You can ask to try to answer the question again or go back to an earlier question and add information. Others prefer to give live interviews. Then you know that what you say won't be edited and possibly taken out of context. If you are talking to a print journalist you can first talk them through the story and then provide an official quote that can be used in the article tailored to the journalists angle on the story. Most journalists will be happy to let you prepare the quote carefully and call them back or send it by email.

In all cases, it is good to be prepared. Have your press release to hand. Make some notes on what you would like to say, even word for word, so you can read it as long as you will appear natural (obviously easier on the radio than television).

You are unlikely to be asked exactly the questions you would like. If the journalist is unfamiliar with Simpol, they may want to ask about the issues it will address, such as unfair trade. Without ignoring the question, ensure that you make the points you want to. Keep on talking, without forcing the interviewer to interrupt you, but bearing in mind that you don't know how many questions they will ask. When you stop that may be the end of the interview.

To prepare for your first interviews, practice with friends. Try to explain your key points as briefly but as interestingly as possible. Ask your friends to fire all possible questions at you so you become comfortable responding.

Prior to giving your interview, talk through the issue with the journalist or researcher and ask for an indication of the questions in advance so you can prepare, even if it is a couple of minutes before the tape starts rolling.

When you give an interview try to record it. If you can't arrange for it to be recorded when it goes out, ask the broadcaster in advance and they will usually provide you with a copy. Alternatively, use a dictaphone type recorder or a mini-disc to record it yourself as you give it. You can even do this with telephone interviews. Afterward listen to your interviews several times, imagining you know nothing about Simpol. Would you understand after hearing the interview? What went right and what would you do differently next time. Also listen to interviews given by others which you will find on the Simpol websites. Learn the phrases that came across well and avoid anything that did not.

It is difficult to interest television in news stories as they have less space for news than newspapers or radio and cover a larger area. However, if you wish to pursue this, contact Simpol-UK for advice.

Media training

From time-to-time Simpol-UK organises workshops on working with the media. Keep an eye on the newsletter and website for dates of forthcoming events. This will cover the above topics in more detail and allow you to practice writing press releases and giving interviews.

See the recent press releases included in this pack and on the Simpol-UK website. Remember to send Simpol-UK copies of your press releases and media coverage for their records. For assistance in working with the media contact us via the website anytime.