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Sharing Your Expertise in Mainstream Media

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Image



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What is "Media"?

Media is the collective term for methods of mass communication (e.g., TV or radio broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, books, the Internet) and their creators. Nowadays, most people get their information from a combination of mainstream or "traditional" media (television, newspapers, magazines, radio) and social media (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.).

Communicating through mainstream media and using your own social media platforms are both great ways to inform the public about the issues, concerns, and day-to-day realities of living with HIV. Social media is a form of media, though it is unique in that users create, curate, and post their own content, so guidelines for using these methods differ from traditional media. Please see our fact sheet, [Social Media, HIV Advocacy, and Your Voice](#), for a more in-depth look at social media for HIV advocates.

With broadcast or print media, people who wish to share a story or issue must engage with producers, editors, or journalists to get their message across to a wider audience. If you are a spokesperson for an organization or are known to have expertise on a particular issue, media outlets may reach out to you for interviews or quotes.

Ask for more information about the specific issue or angle of the article, what information the reporter already has, and why they want to talk with you in particular.

Sharing your experiences in the media can also be a little scary at first. By following a few simple guidelines, you can approach working with traditional with a sense of confidence and control.

Responding to an Interview Request

- Always find out who will be interviewing you. Ask for the reporter's full name and the media organization (newspaper, TV station, website, etc.) for which they work. Podcasting (creating web-based audio or video episodes on a topic or theme) is a fairly new form of delivering information and holding interviews. If the interview is in podcast format, try to listen to previous episodes to get familiar with the style and feel of the conversation. Decide if it is something you are comfortable with.
- Ask what the reporter is writing about and why. "I'm writing a story about HIV/AIDS" is not enough. Ask for more information about the specific issue or angle of the article, what information the reporter already has, and why they want to talk with you in particular. It is important to have a sense of how you will be represented in the story – and to express any concerns you may have about representation.

Remember to protect your confidentiality and the confidentiality of

others.

- Confidentiality may be very important to you. Tell the reporter exactly how you want to be identified in the story and make sure they agree to use only that name. You can use your first name only, initials, or a pseudonym (a false name the reporter will use to refer to you while telling the public it is not your real identity). Feel free to use your full name if you are comfortable doing so, but this is not necessary. There is nothing wrong with using something other than your full name. Some publications do not allow this practice in their articles, though. If you wish to use an alternate name or initials, it is important to check with the reporter before the interview to make sure that their publication allows this.
- Set up a specific time and place to conduct the interview. You do not have to allow the reporter into your home or workplace – nor do you have to agree to meet anywhere that makes you uncomfortable. If you do meet in person, you may choose to meet in a semi-public place like a public park with several people around. Find a place that is private enough to have a conversation, but public enough not to be alone. Zoom meetings may alleviate concerns about location.
- The interview may be done over the phone or via Zoom. If that is the case, make sure you are interviewed at a time and location where you will not be distracted by other calls, noise, or people listening in, and where you can be sure your phone or internet will have a good connection.
- Many interviewers record their calls or conversations. If this makes you uncomfortable, it is important to ask the reporter if she or he intends to record the interview and what is done with the recording after the reporter is finished with it. Podcasts by nature are recorded, so make sure you are comfortable with that in advance.

Be Prepared

- If the reporter is on a tight deadline and wants to talk to you immediately, do not feel pressured. It is the reporter's deadline and pressure, not yours. It is important to find out who the reporter is and what he or she wants to talk about. Ask if the reporter can call back when you are free to talk without distractions, even if it is only a few minutes later. This will also give you a little time to prepare.
- Do a little homework. Find out what kind of stories the newspaper or station usually runs, especially about HIV and issues related to HIV, like women's health or LGBTQ rights. Look for stories done by your reporter to get an idea of their interests, the kinds of questions that might be asked, and if they have a particular "angle" or perspective. You do not have to do the interview if you feel uncomfortable with the tone or perspective of the reporter, or the news outlet for which they are reporting.

If you do not know the answer to a question, it is perfectly fine to say, 'I don't know.'

- If possible, have some background material you can refer to while being interviewed. For instance, if you will be speaking about medical issues, you may want to have a fact sheet on hand so that you and the reporter will understand any technical terms.
- Think ahead about how you would like to handle questions that might make you uncomfortable. These could be questions about how you came to be living with HIV, your family, your health, or any topic you would rather not discuss. It may be helpful to have a pre-prepared response such as "I am not prepared to answer questions about that right now," or "I would rather not comment on that."

During the Interview

- Try to stay calm. Remember that the interviewer chose you for a specific reason. Most likely, the reporter is interested in your personal story or experience, which means you are the expert and the only one who knows the answers. You are in control of where the interview goes, which questions you answer, and whether the interview continues. This can be a source of calm and relaxation.
- Try to avoid chatting casually with a reporter. You may feel you are simply speaking as one person to another, but remember the reporter is doing a job and anything you say can be used in the story. Even if a reporter asks you something "off the record" (meaning your answer is not going to be directly used in the story), you may say something that will change the tone or meaning of the interview.
- If you are with an organization that is holding a public event, such as a rally or press conference, and a reporter asks you for a quote, it is best to direct her or him to your group's official media spokesperson.

Answering the Questions

- Listen carefully to the question. If you do not fully understand it, ask the reporter to repeat it or ask it again in different words. You can also ask for a few moments to think about your answer. You do not have to have a quick response for every question. And if you do not know the answer to a question, it is perfectly fine to say, "I don't know."
- Try to keep answers short and to the point. Only give the reporter as much information as needed to answer the questions.
- Stick to the point you want to make. Even if a reporter asks a follow-up question that seems to disagree with what you said, you can simply repeat yourself or restate your response in different words. Stick to what you believe and what you mean.
- Speak slowly and clearly so the reporter can get your exact words down. Use short, simple sentences because reporters often edit remarks down to brief quotes.
- Finish your point. If the reporter tries to interrupt you, simply tell them politely that you want to finish your statement.
- You do not have to answer every question a reporter asks you. If you are unsure or uneasy about a question, ask why it is being asked and what it has to do with the story. If, after receiving additional information, you still do not want to answer a question, try to avoid saying "no comment." This can sound very abrupt and negative. You can say instead, "I'm not sure I can answer that" or, in the case of very technical information, "I'm not qualified to answer that." Direct the reporter to someone you think can provide the information.
- Try not to let the reporter put words in your mouth. Help the reporter understand what you mean, but if they restate your answer differently, feel free to repeat or restate what you said in your own words.
- Remember to protect your confidentiality and the confidentiality of others. If you have told the reporter you want to be identified by first name only or a pseudonym, do not give out a lot of information that may help to identify you. For instance, do not reveal specifics of where you work and what you do. Also, do not reveal information about others by saying something like, "I first went to a support group with my friend Jane Johnson, who is also a woman living with HIV."

After the Interview

No one can guarantee that you will always be accurately quoted in the media but following the tips above can help. After the interview, ask when the story will appear. Read or watch it, and if you feel it was unfair, contact an editor at the publication, website, or station.

Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to talking to the media.

- [Communications Resource Center \(Positive Women's Network - USA\)](#)
- [Making Media Work for HIV Justice \(HIV Justice Worldwide\)](#)
- [Women's Rights Campaigning: Info-Activism Toolkit \(CREA\)](#)
- [How to Work With the Media \(American Association of University Women\)](#)



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