

Playing the Media Game

'If you sup with the devil use a long spoon'

Aileen O'Carroll

2004

The Dublin Grassroots Network put a number of structures in place to avoid some of the pitfalls of dealing with the media.

Perhaps the two biggest problems in dealing with the media are firstly that the media can, through the questions they ask and the pressures they bring, begin to set the political agenda of the group. Secondly servicing the media machine can take up all a group's time and energy (to the detriment of the other activity).

One way Grassroots dealt with this problem was to set up a media working group comprising both spokespeople and those who helped draft statements. This was a sub-group of the larger organisation, so the number of people working on media issues was limited. In addition it meant that policy decisions were made by the larger group of all Grassroots activists, with less concern for how the media would interpret those decisions.

Media spokespeople were elected and could be recalled if they had failed to represent Dublin Grassroots Network in accordance with the network's wishes.

Talking to the media places a number of other pressures on the individual. On the one hand the media can flatter the ego, on the other they can ridicule and humiliate. It is not good for one's mental health to be a media spokesperson. In order to share the burden therefore for each event a number of spokespeople are usually nominated (usually two men and two women).

The person most affected by the media's political pressure, is not surprisingly, the spokesperson. It is they who are pressurised to make commitments and to answer questions that are often unanswerable. Furthermore the media often describes spokespeople as 'leaders of the movement' and influenced by the attention, it is all too easy for spokespeople to allow themselves to be put in this role. This is obviously a problem for a non-hierarchical organisation.

In order to minimise these effects, in the Dublin Grassroots Network, the spokespeople are rotated. After each event, the spokespeople resigned, handing over the burden to a new team.

Rotating spokespeople has the additional advantage of increasing skills levels and thus the confidence of the group.

To ensure that the spokespersons represented Grassroots' opinion (rather than just themselves) spokespersons were instructed that their statements had to follow certain guidelines. During the Mayday protests in Dublin those guidelines were:

1. We do not criticize other groups
2. We speak only on behalf of the Dublin Grassroots Network i.e. we don't give our own personal opinions.
3. We use DGN leaflets as a guideline to the Grassroots' position. If we are asked about anything outside the guidelines, we say 'no comment'.

The media often mis-report and this can cause conflict if the group feels that errors arise from things the spokespeople haven't actually said. In order to minimise this, a section of each meeting was open for all to discuss the work of the media group and the media group's meetings were open to all who wanted to attend.

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