

# Handling Media Inquiries & Building Relationships with Reporters

Published: December 2024

# Determining Whether to Take Media Inquiry

# SHOULD I TAKE THE MEDIA INQUIRY?

**First, make sure you know the answers to these questions...**

- What is the story/angle the reporter is covering?
- Does the reporter/outlet have a good track record on covering this issue?
- What is the reporter's timeline? When is their deadline?
- If the reporter wants an interview, how much time do they anticipate needing?
- What's the medium? If radio or TV – is it pre-taped or live?

# SHOULD I TAKE THE MEDIA INQUIRY?

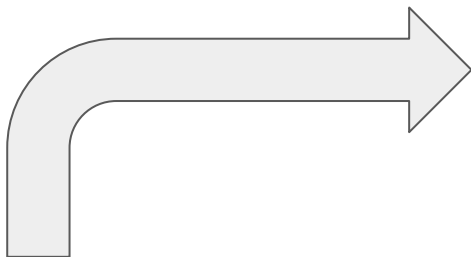
## Yes! Set up the interview and start prepping if:

- The story is in line with the issues and priorities you're focused on right now;
- It's an opportunity to inject your voice into the conversation, influence public opinion, or counter a harmful narrative;
- The reporter is friendly and/or has a track record of strong reporting on the issue; and/or
- You have the time/capacity to do an interview in the format they're asking.

## No, don't bother if:

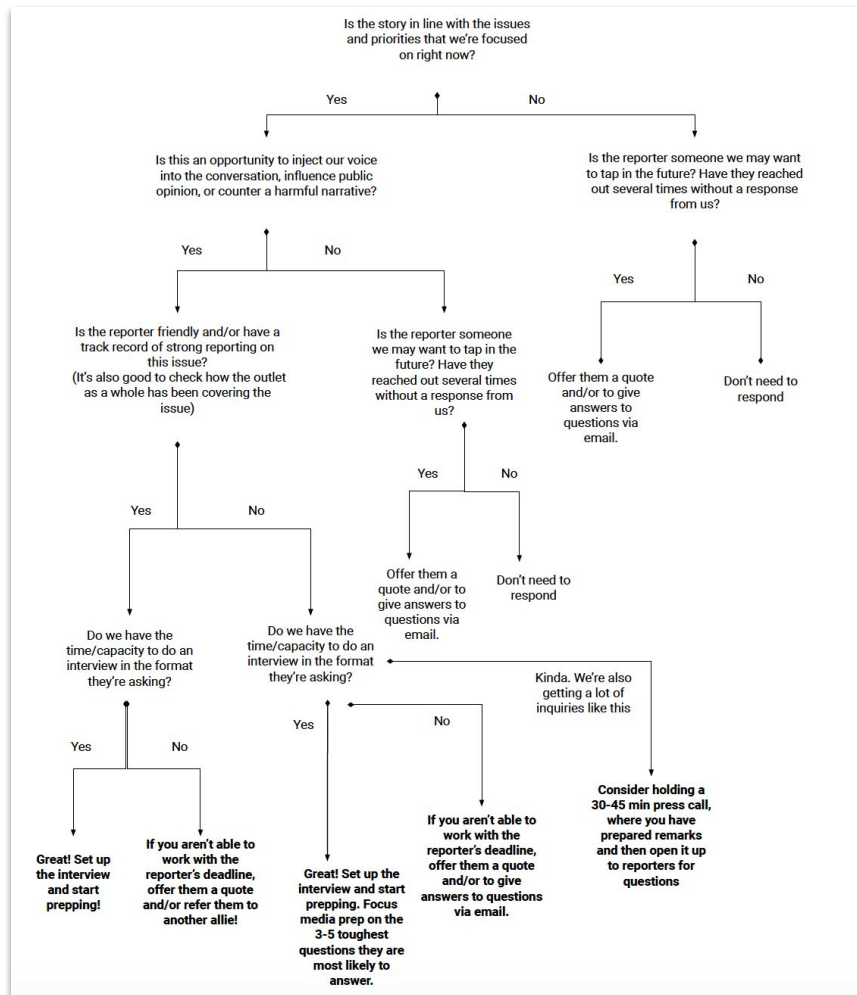
- The story isn't in line with the issues and priorities you're focused on right now;
- It's not an opportunity to inject your voice into the conversation, influence public opinion, or counter a harmful narrative;
- The reporter doesn't have a strong track record of reporting on the issue, hasn't reached out much before, and isn't someone you'd want to tap in the future; and/or
- You aren't able to work with the reporter's deadline.

You can also use LP's [decision-making tree](#)



# MEDIA INQUIRY

## DECISION-MAKING TREE



# STILL NOT SURE? YOU HAVE OPTIONS!

If...

- The story is pretty in line with the issues and priorities you're focused on right now;
- It's an opportunity to inject your voice into the conversation, influence public opinion, or counter a harmful narrative;
- The reporter is friendly and/or has a track record of strong reporting on the issue and is someone you either have heard from a fair amount before or would potentially want to tap later; but
- **You don't have the time/capacity to do an interview in the format they're asking.**



# ...THEN YOU COULD...

- **Respond to questions via email** – this can sometimes be faster if the reporter only has a few questions. It also avoids the back-and-forth follow up if you set the expectation that you have time to just send one set of answers.
- **Send a quote** – you can say something like, “unfortunately, I just don’t have time to do an interview on your timeline, but I’d be happy to send you a brief quote for your story that summarizes my perspective on the issue.”
- **Refer to an ally** – you can say, “unfortunately, I don’t have time to do an interview on your timeline, but I’d highly recommend reaching out to [xyz organization], as they have a few folks looking into this who would be fantastic sources for you.” It helps if you can provide direct contact info or even loop reporters with your ally.
- **Send existing resources** – you can say “unfortunately, I don’t have time to do an interview on your timeline, but I actually released a report/blog/tweet thread on this topic recently that you might find useful.” Note: the resource does NOT need to be your own – it can be any resource you think would help the reporters’ framing.
- **Host a press call** – sometimes, if you have many reporters reaching out to you to conduct separate interviews on the same topic, it’s best to just set up one press call and invite interested reporters, so that you just need to set aside that one time to answer questions, rather than setting up a bunch of different interviews.

# IMPORTANT NOTE

*\*You don't have to choose just one of these alternative options\**

You can send a quote AND a resource, or refer to an allie AND send your answers to their questions via email.

These are all great **relationship-building tools** as well. That's because every single one of these options is FAR better than not replying at all or saying no flat out.



# TERMS TO BE AWARE OF

Anything you write in an email or tell a reporter over the phone can be used publicly and attributed to you UNLESS you specify that it's on background or off-the-record:

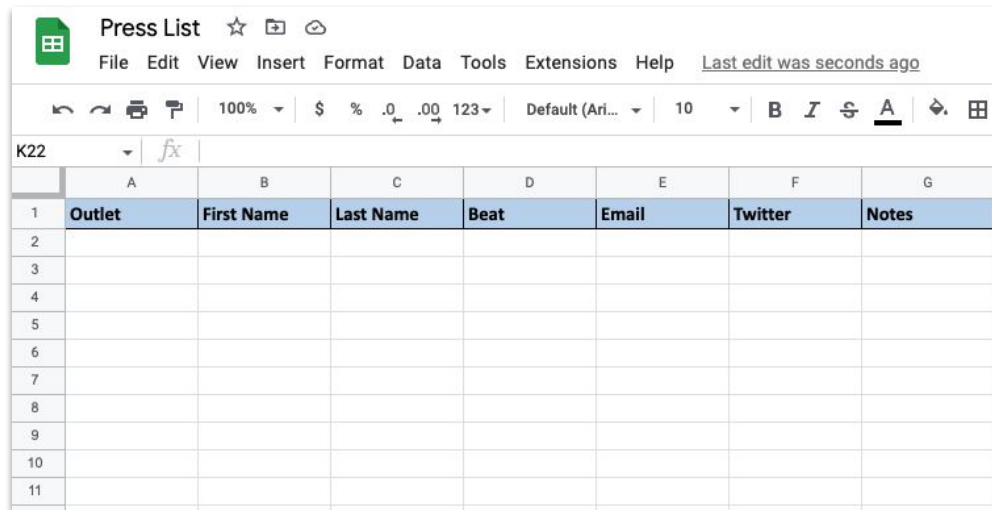
- **On-the-record:** Anything you say is fair game and quotable
- **Off-the-record:** Reporters can't use anything you say. You go off the record when you want to explain a situation that you feel must remain top secret.
- **On-background:** You are providing context/background. Reporters can use the information you share, but can not attribute it to you. Really good when you need to provide background on why you feel a particular way about an issue, but don't want that reasoning to be attributed to you.

# Tracking Outreach

# PRESS LISTS

**A press list is a list of reporters who could be useful for you to keep in contact with. Some recommendations:**

- Create a spreadsheet that allows you to list friendly reporters and corresponding information about them, such as their beat, email, Twitter, phone number, notes, etc.
- When compiling your list, think about who covers the issues you're passionate about. What are the issues that you want to reach out to press about? Who covers these issues? Who covers them particularly well? Who are you trying to reach? What news outlets do these folks read / watch / listen to?
- If your list is becoming unruly, create tabs for your key issues. For example, a list for housing, public safety, and education. It's okay (and actually good) if there is overlap between them!
- Remember to keep your list updated! There's lots of turnover in local press.



The screenshot shows a Google Sheet titled "Press List" with a menu bar (File, Edit, View, Insert, Format, Data, Tools, Extensions, Help) and a status bar indicating "Last edit was seconds ago". The spreadsheet has a grid with columns A through G and rows 1 through 11. The first row (row 1) is the header row with the following labels: "Outlet" (column A), "First Name" (column B), "Last Name" (column C), "Beat" (column D), "Email" (column E), "Twitter" (column F), and "Notes" (column G). The subsequent rows (rows 2 through 11) are empty, providing space for data entry.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Outlet	First Name	Last Name	Beat	Email	Twitter	Notes
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11							

# TRACKING YOUR PRESS COVERAGE

**Whenever you get press coverage, make sure you track that as well!** You can stay on top of this by setting a google alert for your name (and your title if your name is common). That way, you'll get an email whenever your name and / or title are mentioned in press.

This coverage can also be easily logged in a spreadsheet. You just want to make sure that you **note the outlet, reporter, date, link, issue area, and any information you think would be helpful later on.**

And of course, make it a point to **add new reporters to your press lists** if they cite you in a helpful way.

These logs make it really easy to go back and see if a reporter has quoted you before when you get an inquiry.

# Building Reporter Relationships

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS

1. **“Target” reporters:** As you’re consuming your own news, note reporters who write on your issues and make a concerted effort to introduce yourself to them via email, and pitch them. Sometimes it helps to have a “target” list of reporters that you continually update – **a list of a few reporters you really want to make inroads with**. If you have a reporter you really want to target, you could offer to set up a “coffee” – whether virtual or in person, to just introduce yourself and try to build trust and cultivate a relationship.
2. **Reach out often:** Once you’ve formed those relationships, you want to make sure you keep them! **The best way to keep reporter relationships is by pitching them stories, sending them press releases or statements, flagging resources for them, sending them quotes, and inviting to press calls.**
3. **Always respond:** It’s a good practice to **always respond to reporter requests, even if you’re just politely declining**, referring them elsewhere, etc. This goes a long way, as reporters are very used to being ghosted.

# PRESS TOOLS = REPORTER RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TOOLS



Immigrant Justice ▸ February 5, 2024

## LOCAL LEADERS DENOUNCE SENATE DEAL THAT WOULD GUT ASYLUM

READ MORE →

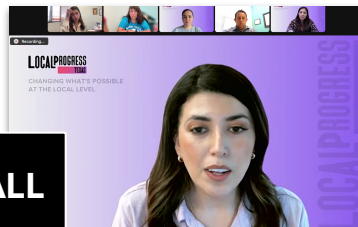
## PRESS STATEMENT

With Texas' trigger law expected to go into effect this Thursday, August 25th, I wanted to see if you would be interested in covering a story on how localities in Texas are using their local authority to protect people seeking abortions.

Texas' trigger law will ban and criminalize abortion. Already, five Texas localities – [Denton](#), [Austin](#), [San Antonio](#), [El Paso County](#), and [Dallas](#) – have passed decriminalization resolutions that (a) direct law enforcement to make investigating abortion and pregnancy outcomes their lowest priority and (b) ensure city funds and personnel cannot be used to solicit, catalog, report, or investigate information related to an individual seeking abortion or other reproductive care services.

We expect Houston, Laredo, DeSoto, San Marcos, and Fort Worth may follow suit shortly. And this isn't just exclusive to Texas. We've seen cities across the country – like [South Fulton, GA](#), [Nashville, TN](#), [Atlanta, GA](#), and [New Orleans, LA](#) – authorize similar measures.

## PITCH



## PRESS CALL

"As I sat in the courtroom, it was clear that cities can and should continue to fight to protect their ability to shape their budgets and respond to their communities' needs. If we don't stand up and defend local control, we lose power. Our cities are closest to communities. When we lose power, so does everyone."

**JACK PORTER**  
TALLAHASSEE COMMISSIONER

LOC

## QUOTE

▸ January 5, 2024

## HUNDREDS OF LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS CALL FOR A CEASEFIRE

Today, more than 300 local elected officials across the country released an open letter to the Biden-Harris administration and Congress calling for a ceasefire.

## PRESS RELEASE

Press Conference - February 8, 11:30 AM ET

### Local Leaders Across Florida Sound Alarm on Legislative Session

*Local elected officials call on legislature to focus on protecting renters, local democracy, First Amendment rights, and reproductive justice*

TALLAHASSEE -- As we enter into a third year of this pandemic, Floridians continue to sound the alarm on the ever-growing need for our state to prioritize housing, local democracy, and First Amendment rights. However, the legislative session so far has made it clear that Governor DeSantis and GOP legislators will continue ignoring the real needs of our communities and instead fast track bills that undermine home rule and further restrict local democracy.

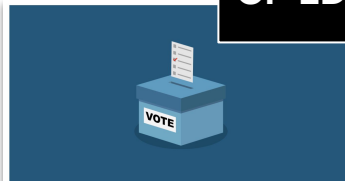
Floridians know what they need and have a right to local power. Local elected officials put partisanship aside to employ innovative solutions and put people first. The legislature must end its assault on home rule and let locals work.

**WHAT:** Press Conference with Local Elected Officials

**WHEN:** Tuesday, February 8 at 11:30 am ET

## MEDIA ADVISORY

## OP-ED



### OP-ED: HOW THIS ELECTION IS PUTTING REAL SAFETY ON THE BALLOT IN TEXAS

BY VANESSA PUENTES & JALEN MCKEE-RODRIGUEZ | MAY 1, 2023 | OPINION, TEXAS ELECTIONS

### Armed guards are not the answer

We all agree that students and staff have the right to be safe at school. As chair of the Hopkins school board, a school district represented by Rep. Dean Phillips, I am deeply concerned by his recent call to put an armed guard in every school in America. Study after study has shown that the presence of police or armed guards in schools does not deter school shooters. In fact, it's been proven that in tragic situations where shooters are trying to achieve their own death, they seek out schools where someone with a gun is present. Research also shows that putting more police in schools exacerbates the school-to-prison pipeline, disproportionately criminalizing students of color, low-income students, students who access special services and LGBTQ students. Further, a study by the Giffords Law Center cites over 100 publicly reported incidents of mishandled guns in schools, leading to dangerous situations for students and staff.

Instead of fighting violence with violence, I urge our congressman to follow the research and engage with students, educators and educational leaders about more effective solutions. He would hear ideas like more funding for the implementation of restorative practices, community schools, mental health support, practical building-safety measures and increased pay for our educators and staff who do the essential work every day of building strong relationships with students. More guns in our schools will not make us safer.

Jen Westmoreland, Hopkins

The writer is chair of the Hopkins school board.

## LTE

# Dealing with Mainstream Media Attacks



# SHOULD I EVEN RESPOND?

- **First**, take a moment (or as long as you need) to vent, take a deep breath, think – whatever feels right
- **Second**, remember that no response IS a response, and that we (LP) are here to help you decide whether to respond (or just to listen)
- **Third**, consider the following questions, BUT remember that this is not prescriptive – every situation is different
  - Is this engagement or an attack?
  - Is the attack political or personal?
  - Is there missing information or misinterpretation?
  - How wide-reaching is this attack?
  - Am I getting a lot of other press requests about this?

# IS THIS ENGAGEMENT OR AN ATTACK?

## Engagement

- Usually pertains to a specific issue
- Can be emotional or tense but there's an opportunity for conversation.
- You can identify a need or concern



**Consider responding**

## Attack

- Personal
- Political
- Does not provide insight
- Microaggression



**Let's find out more**

# IS THE ATTACK POLITICAL OR PERSONAL?

## Political Attack

→ Ex: portraying you as disruptive or incompetent politically



**Consider responding**

## Personal Attack

→ Ex: microaggression or other identity-based attack



**Let's find out more**

# IS THERE MISSING INFORMATION OR MISINTERPRETATION?

**Yes**

→ Ex: misinterpretation of an ordinance you introduced



**Consider responding**

**No**

→ Ex: the interpretation is negative based on opinion / slant



**Let's find out more**

# HOW WIDE-REACHING IS THIS ATTACK?

**Large**

→ Ex: it feels like this is EVERYWHERE I look



**Consider responding**

**Small**

→ Ex: just a loud minority are engaging with it



**Let's find out more**

# AM I GETTING A LOT OF OTHER PRESS REQUESTS ABOUT THIS?

Yes



Consider responding

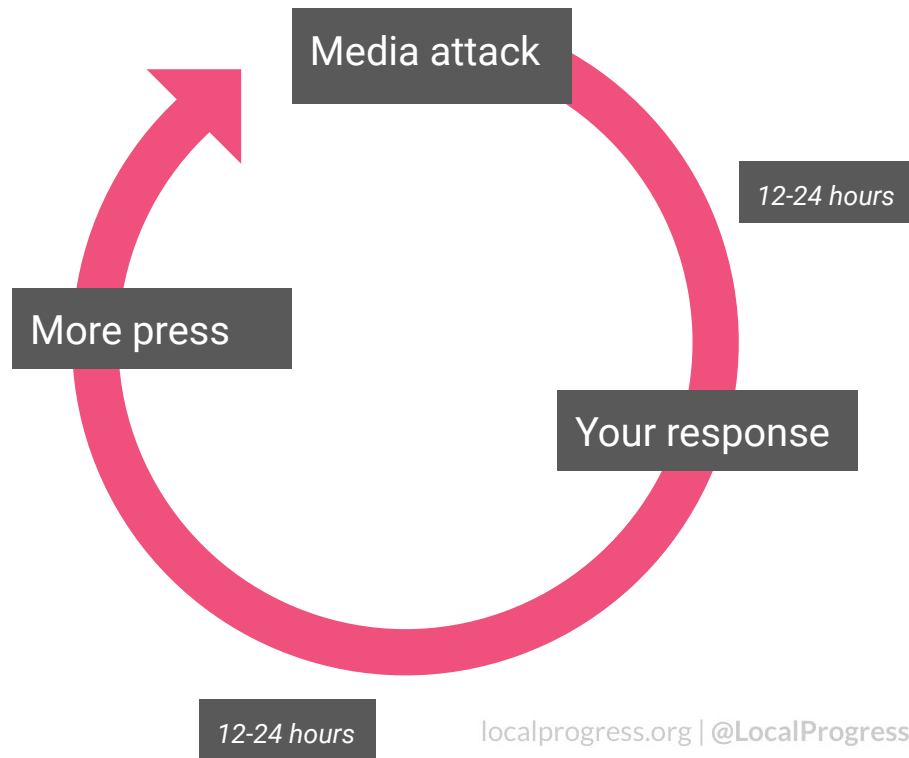
No



Don't bother

# HOW TO RESPOND

If you want to  
respond publicly →  
leverage news  
cycle



# BEST PRACTICES: PERSONAL PUBLIC RESPONSE

1. **Move quickly** – if you are going to personally respond publicly, do so within 12 – 24 hours
2. **Consider releasing a statement** – a SHORT statement is a good way to inject your response / retort into the public narrative
3. **Share your statement widely** – both on social media (particularly Twitter + Instagram) and with friendly reporters
  - a. Consider sharing a **video** of you reading your statement on social – humanize yourself
4. **Ask your allies to uplift your statement** – shoot your political allies (friends, partners, aligned colleagues, etc.) a text and ask them to uplift your statement



# IF YOU DON'T WANT TO PUBLICLY RESPOND ON YOUR OWN BEHALF

Consider the following questions...

- Does the reporter who published the attack seem reasonable?
- Are they someone you feel you should repair the relationship with?
- Can you foresee yourself wanting to pitch them a story later?

# DOES THE REPORTER SEEM REASONABLE / ARE THEY SOMEONE YOU FEEL YOU SHOULD REPAIR THE RELATIONSHIP WITH?

Yes



Consider requesting an  
off-the-record (or  
on-background)  
conversation

No



Consider engaging external  
validators

# OFF-THE-RECORD OR ON-BACKGROUND CONVOS

*Responding by building relationships*

- Reach out to the reporter directly to request an off-the-record or on-background conversation
  - This can be a phone call or an in-person meeting (even a coffee)
- Explain why you want to chat → reference the specific story and explain why you think a conversation is important

**On background:** You are providing context/background. They can use the information you share, but can not attribute it to you.

**Off-the-Record:** Reporters can't use anything you say. You go off the record when you want to explain a situation that you feel must remain secret.

# EXAMPLE

**Scenario:** You are a city councilmember. A city hall reporter who frequently covers your work for the largest city paper wrote a pretty damning story about a recent ceasefire ordinance you proposed. They did not reach out to interview you and instead only quoted colleagues and community members who oppose the ordinance. The story's frame was essentially that local governments have no place commenting on foreign affairs. Because this a reporter who frequently covers your work for a large audience, you decide it makes it sense to reach out to talk.

# EXAMPLE

## Sample email / text to the reporter:

Hi x, I just read your piece on the ceasefire ordinance I introduced. I'll be honest, I'm disappointed you didn't reach out to me to talk about it before publishing. That being said, I'm wondering if we could touch base – off-the-record or on-background – so I can better understand where you're coming from. I want to make sure that I'm a direct resource for you when you're covering my work.

# DOES THE REPORTER SEEM REASONABLE / ARE THEY SOMEONE YOU FEEL YOU SHOULD REPAIR THE RELATIONSHIP WITH?

Yes



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off-the-record (or  
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conversation

No



Consider engaging external  
validators

# EXTERNAL VALIDATORS

*Responding by drowning out the noise*

Steps:

1. Create a cheering squad
2. Tailor it to the specific moment
3. Activate your cheering squad
4. Arm your cheering squad



**What does this look  
like in practice??**

# HOW TO CREATE A CHEERING SQUAD

1. Identify **values-aligned people** in your community – could be friends, advocates, family, organizers, community members, partners, neighbors colleagues, faith leaders, volunteers, etc.
2. Make a list of them!
3. Reach out to them – explain that as an elected official, it's important that you establish allies you can reach out to for public support during key moments
  - Be sure to agree on the best way to contact them quickly in such moments, and add that contact info to your list



# HOW TO TAILOR YOUR CHEERING SQUAD

- Consider the issue at hand → what is the attack about?
- Select most helpful members of your cheering squad list; **chose allies whose work / passion overlaps with the issue at hand**
  - For example, if the attack is related to your stance on a public safety issue, you may reach out to your friend who does a lot of community organizing around non-policing public safety efforts and has a solid Twitter following

# HOW TO ACTIVATE YOUR CHEERING SQUAD WHEN YOU NEED THEM

If you feel comfortable with how your cheering squad will respond, there's no need to give them specific language / material. Just **reach out as you would naturally and ask for their support**. For ex:

- “I’m sure you’ve seen what’s been happening recently. If you wouldn’t mind posting something authentic in support of me, I would really appreciate it.”
- “Did you see that terrible piece about me? I’m wondering whether you might be down to write a LTE in response? I’d be happy to help you draft it.”
- “I just released a statement on xyz. I’d really appreciate if you could uplift it and show me some support / love.”

# WHAT TO ARM YOUR CHEERING SQUAD WITH

**If the issue is sticky / you'd prefer to give some guidance, consider sharing some sample language:**

- Sample social media (ex: tweets)
- Talking points
- Op-Ed template
- LTE

Offer to chat with people in person, over the phone, via zoom, etc. to explain the issue in detail and share what kind of messaging you need from them.

# DON'T FORGET!

When you have a chorus of people responding on your behalf, make sure that **YOU** are **uplifting them**, by, for example:

- Retweeting supportive tweets
- Sharing a supportive op-ed or LTE someone wrote on Twitter or Instagram



erica m  
@ericamauter

Follow



Lotta y'all owe [@mitrajunjalali](#) an apology.



**Star Tribune** 🏆 @StarTribune · 3/6/24

**UPDATE: The symbolic statement comes after a month of pressure from pro-Palestinian activists, who packed the council chambers Wednesday for the fifth week in a row.**  
[startribune.com/st-paul-city-c...](https://startribune.com/st-paul-city-c...)

# TACTICS TO PROACTIVELY PREPARE FOR INEVITABLE ATTACKS

1. Keep updating / adding to your cheering squad list
  - a. Meet with a new labor partner who is excited about your work? Add them to your list!
2. Keep an eye on emerging media trends
  - a. Notice a prominent reporter subtly framing your work poorly? It could be worth reaching out to meet with them to develop a relationship.
3. Get ahead of the news cycle
  - a. Sending press releases, statements, quotes, pitches, press call invites, etc. are all ways to build relationships with reporters

**The bottom line:** It is WAY harder for a reporter to attack you when they have a relationship with you.

# GET IN TOUCH

**HAVE A QUESTION? WANT  
COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT?**

**EMAIL THE HELP DESK**

**helpdesk@localprogress.org**

# STAY IN THE KNOW

**SIGN UP FOR OUR EMAILS**

**+**

**STAY CONNECTED:**



**localprogress.org**



**@localprogress**



**LocalProgressNetwork**