

MEDIA HANDBOOK

November 2005

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THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
OF ETHIOPIA
OFFICE OF THE FEDERAL
AUDITOR GENERAL

MEDIA HANDBOOK

Office of the Federal Auditor
General of Ethiopia

November 2005

Message from H. E. the Federal Auditor General

Today the media have become the most important means of communication. There is a variety of other formal and informal means of communicating information and messages. Messages can be transferred in written and spoken forms, using gesture and facial expressions and others. Whatever the means of communication, the important point is that the message is conveyed clearly and accurately from the source to the receiver.

Quite apart from educational background, experiences and capabilities of the message providers, the nature of the message in terms of complexity and simplicity needs close consideration. Information can be transferred either as a factual description or as a concept. The factual description is not only simpler for information providers to pass on to the receiver, but a receiver cannot alter the given information from its intended meaning. A message in conceptual form, on the other hand, is susceptible to different interpretations; receivers can perceive it out of the intended meaning for different reasons.

In this regard, we want to ensure that our audit findings are transmitted to the media in a way that minimizes the risk of their being open to different interpretations. Our audit findings play an important role in promoting accountability, transparency and good governance in government operations.

However, this contribution becomes truly effective when the audit message is communicated well, without modification and alteration.

In order to avoid ambiguity or misrepresentation, auditors and spokespersons should be aware of and be acquainted with the media requirements. It is important for us to develop technical skills in dealing with the media.

In this regard, this Media Handbook will go a long way to fill the gap that currently exists among auditors, spokespersons and the media. The Handbook provides guidelines for auditors and spokespersons for developing better media relations. We should read and make ourselves familiar with it.



Lemma Argaw
Federal Auditor General

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Information is Power!

1. Introduction

This handbook is designed to assist auditors and spokespersons from the Offices of Auditors General to develop better media relations. The underlying premise is that the OAGs need to build media relations and earn better media coverage. The purpose of the improved media coverage is to inform elected representatives and the public about the work of the Auditors General. Since elected representatives do not have much time to read large technical reports, it is important that they be informed about the work of the Offices in an efficient manner. The media is the best medium for keeping the elected representatives aware of audit findings and recommendations.

Making the audit offices more media friendly is a building process that starts with a media policy for the entire organization, one which sets out the goals, principles standards, roles and responsibilities of all employees in the organization. After the policy is created, the next step is to develop a coherent media strategy and the ability to anticipate, not merely react to, changing events in the media community.

2. What is News? What is Newsworthy?

News is information that has relevance to the audience of a specific news media outlet. To be newsworthy it must meet some of the following criteria:

- ♦ **Significant** – The more people, resources, consequences or damage or losses involved, the more significant the issue, and the most significant issue, makes the biggest news.
- ♦ **Unusual, Unexpected, Contradictory** – If an event is unexpected or contradicts what has been claimed publicly, then that is news.
- ♦ **Important to be Aware of** – What the reader or listener or viewer must know about an individual or organization in order to cast a vote, judge performance of a government, purchase a product, or make up their mind.
- ♦ **Would like to know** – Of interest to the readers, listeners/viewers due to celebrity status, public profile, personal impact, gossip, personal insights.
- ♦ **Impact** – How an event, issue or report affects the readers or listeners or viewers pocketbook, taxes, performance of government or other organizations.

It is the news organization's perception of what is newsworthy that will determine coverage, not the auditors. Therefore it is essential to build effective media relations so the media will pay attention to you and let you get the audit messages out clearly and make news.

3. Good Media Relations Principles

- ♦ **Be accessible:** Designate spokespersons for the Office who are knowledgeable and trained to speak on topics within their responsibility.
- ♦ **Be prompt:** Always return journalist's phone calls promptly.
- ♦ **Be honest:** Always tell the truth.
- ♦ **Know what you are talking about:** It is important that you be knowledgeable about your subject and keep up to date with audit findings and latest reports. Otherwise journalists will cease to come to you.
- ♦ **Be helpful:** Be a good source before you become a good interviewee.
- ♦ **Be reliable:** When you make a commitment, follow through.

4. Media Realities

- ♦ **Lots of Competition:** The media, in most countries, cover the public and the private sectors and are competitive. They cover a wide spectrum of technologies, interests and backgrounds. Consequently, they do not reflect a one-dimensional group, nor do they represent a single viewpoint. Basically they break down into public sector and private sector media. This is also true in Ethiopia. They are under constant pressure to get a good story, provide instant analysis, and constantly face tight deadlines. In their routine

activities, there are laws and professional code of ethics that journalists must respect.

- ♦ **Narrow News Hole:** A news hole is the amount of time or space devoted to news and editorials. TV particularly has narrow news holes. If it is a busy news day, your story might be given short shrift or ignored. Therefore, it is important to time the delivery of your news.
- ♦ **Computer Networks:** Journalists now have instant access to immense information through on-line computers. Previous media stories about the OAG are online and accessible. Journalists should be able to get their background information from your website (which will be developed soon). Once the audit reports are tabled, they should be on the website soon.
- ♦ **Market Driven:** The private sector media outlets are driven to build ratings and increase market share. The resulting pressure is reflected in the assignments, resources, and coverage of popular issues. As most media outlets do not assign reporters to the parliamentary beat coverage about government affairs is sporadic.
- ♦ **Government Control:** In many countries, governments control the electronic media and some leading print media. As such, government controlled media offer “what the government wants you to know” and negative information about the government may be suppressed. Private sector media, as a result, can improve the transparency of government. They can freely quote Auditors General's reports or news conference comments.

- ♦ **Influential:** Media power emanates from the media's ability to influence the agenda for policy makers and politicians. Since most politicians are news sensitive the media are an important part of their daily lives and mindsets. Those who know how to effectively access the media and communicate effectively, share in that power.

- ♦ **Profit Seeking:** Private sector media journalists are being asked to do more with less, which means reduced resources and increased expectations for more stories with a faster turnaround rate. Costs are under strict control in both the public and private sector media.

5. The Nature Of Journalists

Not all journalists are the same. They can, though, be grouped into several categories.

- ♦ **Sensationalist:** Focuses on embarrassing personal or emotional issues, likes to create conflict. Exaggerates the story to build audience.
- ♦ **Ideologists:** Drives a personal, political or social agenda. Sometimes shapes a story to fit a personal agenda. Tends to make issues black and white.
- ♦ **Well-informed:** Relies heavily on knowledgeable sources developed over a long time on a specific beat. Takes pride in knowledge, is respected by colleagues and is committed to getting the real story.

- ♦ **Follows the Pack:** Allows others to define the story of the day. Doesn't want to be seen as having missed the story. Possesses skill in doing a quick and easy story.
- ♦ **Columnist or Commentator:** Usually paid for opinions, which are often controversial. Often aims for the story behind the story. Likes to feed on access and reflect or portray "grass roots".
- ♦ **Community Journalists:** Usually work for small town paper and radio outlets. Concerned about "community" sometimes at the expense of the story. Usually less demanding and less critical in reporting.

It is important for OFAG spokespersons and commentators to understand a reporter's background, approach and attitudes so you can be better prepared for the journalist's line of questioning.

6. Media Policy And Its Essential Elements

A media policy sets out the fundamental principles and procedures for dealing with the media. It clarifies how media relations should be conducted. In this respect, it includes:

- ♦ A statement about the importance of media coverage for the OAGs.

- ♦ A philosophy for the OAG media relations, including:
 - quick responses
 - organized and efficient
 - pro-active and re-active media coverage, and
 - honest and forthright, even when the news is bad or embarrassing.
- ♦ A definition of responsibility for media communications. This should include the roles and responsibilities for the OAG Public Relations Office.
- ♦ A description of the subjects that are off limits, such as criticism of government policies or individual persons.
- ♦ Assurances for those who follow the media policy in good faith.
- ♦ Procedures and suggested time frame for handling media meetings, calls and visits.
- ♦ The media tools which are necessary and appropriate sign-offs for their approval
- ♦ Designated spokespersons or subject specialists.

7. Why Have A Media Strategy?

A media strategy is a means to achieve specific public relations goals through an organized earned media campaign. Its purpose is:

- ♦ To support the OAG's overall mission statement using a communication strategy.
- ♦ To be sure that media relations are no longer an issue of concern.
- ♦ To allow the OAG to respond to and generate (earn) media coverage as desired.

A media strategy should:

- ♦ Focus on an issue or a set of issues.
- ♦ Define the key stakeholders.
- ♦ Identify the needs, concerns and issues of those stakeholders.
- ♦ Articulate key messages from audit findings and recommendations.
- ♦ Outline a program to inform and initiate action.
- ♦ Define specific outcomes of a program.
- ♦ Identify how other communications initiatives relate to the media strategy.
- ♦ Describe how the media strategy can objectively be evaluated.

8. Potential Media Strategies

The OAGs can choose from among a number of potential media strategies or combinations thereof depending on the issue, timing or target audience. The preferred strategy option for the OAGs is a proactive strategy that generates or earns news coverage.

Other options include:

- ♦ Third party strategy that lets others take the lead.
- ♦ Hard news strategy that focuses on events and announcements.
- ♦ Soft news and features strategy that has a more thoughtful, deeper focus. This is also useful for getting audit messages across clearly.
- ♦ Stand-by rapid response strategy that focuses on an immediate response to an attack.
- ♦ Low profile strategy to stay out of the news.
- ♦ Good source strategy by being helpful without being interviewed.
- ♦ Educate the media with a long-term focus
- ♦ Local media strategy that targets local media markets.

9. Important Steps In Getting Your Message To The Media

• Know your media

Begin by collecting basic information on who's who in the media:

- media outlets
- reporters and editors
- issues/topics
- contact database

• Develop ideas

- Capture the essence of the audit issues that you think are worthwhile.
- “Dumb down”, i.e. simplify the audit issues so that an average citizen can see they are relevant.
- Use plain language, not 'auditesse' or 'accountingese'.

• Maintain the flow

- Appear on talk shows.
- Provide background briefings for selected reporters usually held in conjunction with a major announcement or event.
- Accept invitations to editorial board meetings to provide in-depth background to newspaper editors.
- File information for journalists to provide background information.
- Letters to the Editor and guest editorials provide an opportunity to present comments in your own words.
- Media advisory to give the journalists a “heads up” that draw attention to an upcoming event.
- Media availability session or media briefing, which is less formal than a news conference. Either the Auditor General or other higher officials should be personally available to answer questions.
- Encourage media tours of audit office premises and audit sites.
- News conferences should be used only to communicate new and important messages. Use sparingly.

• Follow Up

- Keep track of coverage. Find out who used your idea and how it came across
- Conduct a media content analysis at periodic intervals to assess media coverage of OAG news.
- Inquire why coverage is modest, absent, or inaccurate.

10. News Releases

- ◆ Make sure the announcement is newsworthy and of wide interest.
- ◆ Provide news releases in Amharic and in English.
- ◆ Select the appropriate updated media list.
- ◆ Send to the appropriate editor or producer.
- ◆ Tailor the news release to the appropriate media, print or broadcast.
- ◆ For print news releases, use the past tense, e.g. The Auditor General announced today in parliament ...
- ◆ Limit the length to one page.
- ◆ Use “inverted pyramid” style so the most important information is in the first paragraph.
- ◆ Use only one piece of information per paragraph.
- ◆ Always include the boilerplate (what the OAG is about) in the last paragraph.
- ◆ Answer the “5W’s” and “H”. Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?. Make sure the subject is relevant to those who care.

- ♦ Every news release should have a dateline: a title, date, location, and who to refer to for further information.
- ♦ Use short sentences expressing only one idea.
- ♦ Use direct quotes after receiving approval of the person quoted.
- ♦ End with a "-30-" sign or "more" if the news release continues to a second page, which it should not.
- ♦ Consider audiocassettes and video clips for broadcast outlets.

11. Ground Rules for an Interview

- ♦ Be prepared to live with everything you say to a reporter or you shouldn't say it at all. Don't deny saying something you said. The media have tapes.
- ♦ "On the record" means everything you say may be quoted and you can be named. If you wish not to be named, that must be negotiated in advance.
- ♦ "Off the record" means the reporter agrees to take the information from a protected source without writing a story of using the information in any way. It is not advisable to go "off the record" as the reporter might get the same information elsewhere and report it. So "Off-the-record" is inadvisable and very dangerous. Most newsrooms enforce a no "off-the-record" policy.
- ♦ Sometimes reporters use information for background or not-for-attribution. The reporter can use this information but not name the source. The reporter

might however say "a senior official from the OAG close to this investigation, who asked not to be identified, said". Again this can be dangerous.

- ♦ Deep background means the protected source can't be identified or directly quoted, but the information can be used by the journalist: e.g. "It is well known within the Department that this situation...". You are pointing the reporter in a certain direction.

12. Preparing For An Interview

- ♦ Make sure you know what you are talking about.
- ♦ Know what you want to achieve in an interview.
- ♦ Develop your messages in plain language
- ♦ Craft your messages that have "traction" with your target audience.
- ♦ Focus on why the audit findings/report is important.
- ♦ Tell what the finding will accomplish in the real world.
- ♦ Tell the target audience what they need to know about the subject.
- ♦ Answer the question "so what". Why should the audience care? What are the stakes?
- ♦ What are the core benefits of the audit findings/report?
- ♦ What is new and significant?
- ♦ Anticipate the reporter's questions. Answer the 5W's and H (Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? And don't forget the 6th W "Who cares?"

- ♦ Rehearse by doing a “dry run” only if you are uncertain that you can handle an interview. It is best when interviews are relaxed and spontaneous, rather than a regurgitation of a dry run.
- ♦ Test your messages internally.
- ♦ Practice relaxation exercises.

13. Tips For Dealing With Journalists

- ♦ Respect their deadlines. Return their calls.
- ♦ Be polite. Never lose your temper.
- ♦ Try to be helpful.
- ♦ If you don’t know the answer, say so, but offer to find it.
- ♦ Always tell the truth. Don’t lie or be evasive.
- ♦ Don’t say “no comment”. It is often interpreted as “it’s true, but I can’t say so or admit it”.
- ♦ Stick to your area of responsibility. Don’t speak on behalf of others.
- ♦ Stick to the findings and recommendations of the report. Do not provide more information without first obtaining the required clearance.
- ♦ If the reporter is asking a question that you should not answer, refer him/her to the audited entity.
- ♦ Anticipate the reporter’s needs. Prepare and update fact sheets and talking points constantly.
- ♦ Don’t create a vacuum. Journalists have to report. If you don’t feed them, someone else, or their imagination, will.
- ♦ Treat reporters like human beings.

- ♦ Avoid coming across as “thin skinned” i.e. overly sensitive to negative stories. Keep your perspective clearly.

14. Quotes And Sound Bites

- ♦ Be brief. Radio and TV news sound bites are only 5 to 20 seconds long. That is only one to three sentences.
- ♦ Use everyday language. Saying “this is in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles and audited in accordance with internationally accepted audit standards,” will kill a quote.
- ♦ Be 100% consistent. One apparently contradictory word will be what the reporter hears.
- ♦ Stay on your message track. Don’t get distracted.
- ♦ Avoid off-hand comments, stick to the report. Reporters will be interested in interesting off-hand comments that may differ from the audit report itself.
- ♦ Be sincere and helpful.
- ♦ Answer the reporter’s question.
- ♦ Don’t ignore a critical comment, but don’t repeat an emotionally loaded “baiting” question. If you disagree, refute the bait quickly avoiding the “baiting” words and move to your next message.
- ♦ Ask the interviewer to repeat a question if it is not clearly understood or you need time to collect your thoughts.
- ♦ When you are being taped, you can ask to repeat an answer you wish to improve upon.

- ◆ Try to have fun. An interview is a good opportunity to get your message across and enhance the status of the OAG.

15. Communication Tips

- ◆ Use clear everyday language. Avoid jargon, “bureaucratese” or highly technical vocabulary.
- ◆ Turn off your cell phone so you are not interrupted.
- ◆ Pause to collect your thoughts before answering the question if you need to.
- ◆ Watch the pace. Too fast or slow will be frustrating. Try to be interesting by changing pace.
- ◆ Be enthusiastic. Communicate energy, warmth and friendliness in verbal comments. The energy you project will cause viewers and listeners to remember what you say.
- ◆ Articulate your words. Pronounce each word clearly. Don’t slur words.
- ◆ Be polite, but assertive.
- ◆ Keep sentences brief.
- ◆ Avoid “uh”, “um”, “ok”, “you know” and other repetitive verbal barriers. Better to have silence between words.
- ◆ Look the part of an auditor. Offer a professional appearance.

16. News Conferences

- ◆ News conferences are held to create a newsworthy event and to focus media attention on your message.
- ◆ News conferences get the message out to all media simultaneously and avoid accusations of favoritism to certain reporters.
- ◆ It is important to plan in advance for a news conference to ensure that the message is newsworthy.
- ◆ Pay attention to the arrangement of details such as location, chairperson, and suitability for televisions and radio equipment, access to telephones, etc.
- ◆ Contact editors/producers about two or three days in advance.
- ◆ Prepare an opening statement.
- ◆ Prepare media kits to be handed out as journalists arrive.
- ◆ The media kit should contain a news release, background information, fact sheets/highlight sheets, prepared opening statement, biographies of the newsmakers, photos and diskettes of all materials handed out.
- ◆ Ground rules should include limiting questions to one per person plus a supplementary.
- ◆ Ask reporters to identify themselves before asking a question.

17. What if the Journalist Gets your Story Wrong

- ♦ If the story is inaccurate, don't over-react. Refer it to the public relations officer who can politely point out the error to the editor or producer. If the error is significant, ask for an immediate correction in the next edition or report. If still you are not satisfied, call the managing editor or executive producer and follow up in writing.
- ♦ If the story has an unfair, derisive tone to it, which, in your view, is undeserved, write a letter to the editor/producer that coolly lays out your response.
- ♦ If you don't like the story, but it is factually based, leave it alone.
- ♦ If the story is a real hatchet job based on inaccuracies and innuendo by an influential media outlet, immediately issue a press release to other media correcting the facts.
- ♦ If it is a television or radio report that is inaccurate, ask the producer if you can appear on the program and refute the charges.
- ♦ Don't threaten legal action unless you mean it.
- ♦ If it is not really serious, let it go and save your ammunition for when it counts.
- ♦ Never complain publicly that the media are not treating you well.