



GETTING INVOLVED IN MEDIA-POLICY DEBATES

Questions and Resources for Local Media Leaders and Nonprofit Newsrooms

The Takeaways

- Policy decisions being made now will shape the future of local news and civic information. Journalists and community-rooted media leaders have firsthand knowledge that policymakers need to hear.
- Participation can take many forms, from answering a policymaker's questions or signing a public letter to testifying, writing an Op-Ed or joining a coalition.
- Before you participate, consider what role makes sense for you and your organization. Pay attention to any relevant nonprofit rules, newsroom policies and journalistic-independence concerns. This guide identifies key questions to consider and points toward more detailed legal and advocacy resources.
- See [Alliance for Justice: Bolder Advocacy](#) for resources and guidelines for 501(c)(3) groups in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Why your voice matters

Policy conversations about local media today will shape our news-and-information environment for decades to come. But often the views of a relatively small group of industry lobbyists, trade associations and major news institutions set the terms of debate. While these groups may share important perspectives, a more robust range of stakeholders should get to participate in decisions about the future of local news and civic information.

Journalists and local-media leaders bring firsthand knowledge to these debates. You see where information gaps exist, how the lack of accessible and trustworthy local news affects communities, and what it takes to build lasting relationships with the people you serve.

Perspectives from nonprofit newsrooms, independent publishers, ethnic and community media, community broadcasters and emerging local-media outlets are especially important. These organizations often work to fill critical information gaps, serve communities that other institutions overlook, and develop more sustainable and community-responsive models. Their experiences can help policymakers understand not only what existing media institutions require, but what communities themselves need from their local news-and-information environments.



What participation in policy debates might look like

Journalists and local-media leaders have contributed to media-policy debates in many different ways. Depending on their role, organization and circumstances, they have:

- [Signed](#) public [letters](#).
- [Written Op-Eds/editorials](#).
- Met with lawmakers or legislative staff.
- Testified at [hearings](#) or listening sessions.
- Shared examples of [information gaps](#) or [unmet community needs](#).
- Hosted policymakers for newsroom/community visits.
- Participated in [coalitions](#) or [working groups](#).
- Convened other media leaders.

Community-rooted journalists and media leaders are already making their voices heard.

In **New Jersey**, media practitioners have written Op-Eds, testified before the legislature and [organized in support of the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium](#). In **Wisconsin**, journalists and local-media leaders have used [Op-Eds](#), [sign-on letters](#) and conversations with policymakers to advocate for stronger support for local news and informed communities. In **Massachusetts**, local-newsroom leaders have [met with lawmakers](#) to share what they're seeing in their communities and help inform emerging policy proposals.

** Some of these activities may raise nonprofit-lobbying questions or other legal questions, depending on the organization and circumstances. See the "Resources" section below for more detailed information, and consult qualified legal counsel when you need advice about a particular situation.*

Questions to consider

"I work for a nonprofit newsroom. What rules should I know about?"

Federal and state rules may apply when nonprofit organizations participate in advocacy or lobbying. Which rules apply — and how they apply — can depend on an organization's tax status, location and the particular activity being considered.

This resource does not interpret those rules or provide legal advice. The resources below from Alliance for Justice, the IRS and the National Council of Nonprofits offer more detailed information. Organizations seeking advice about a specific situation should consult qualified legal counsel.

"What about journalistic independence?"

Legal permissibility and journalistic ethics are separate questions. Journalists and news organizations should consider how policy participation fits with their editorial standards, organizational roles and responsibility to remain independent in their coverage.

Questions to consider may include:

- Is the person participating also responsible for covering the policy issue, lawmakers or institutions in question?
- Who is best positioned to speak for the organization — for example, should it be a publisher or executive director rather than a reporter?
- How will the organization distinguish its institutional policy positions from its editorial coverage?
- When should the organization disclose its participation or policy position to its audience?
- What do the newsroom's existing editorial and ethics policies say?

Different organizations may answer these questions differently. What matters is establishing guidelines and guardrails that mesh with a given organization's mission, structure and editorial practices.

“Do I need to check internally first?”

Before speaking or acting on behalf of an organization, consider whether you need to consult:

- newsroom or organizational policies;
- editors, organizational leadership or the board;
- a fiscal sponsor;
- applicable grant or funder requirements; or
- internal rules governing public statements, lobbying and advocacy.

It may also be helpful to clarify whether you are participating on behalf of the organization or in an individual capacity. Direct any questions about the legal significance of that distinction to qualified legal counsel.

Where to start

If you are considering participating in a media-policy debate:

1. **Identify what you want policymakers to understand.** This might be an information gap you see, a community need or the likely impact of a policy proposal.
2. **Consider what role makes sense for you and your organization.** That could range from providing background information to speaking publicly or participating in a coalition.
3. **Review relevant considerations.** Check applicable organizational policies, editorial standards, nonprofit rules and internal approval processes.
4. **Connect with others when useful.** Fellow media leaders and existing coalitions may be able to provide context, coordinate participation or help you identify an appropriate way to contribute.

Resources

Start with the [Alliance for Justice: Bolder Advocacy Toolkit](#), which provides advocacy resources for individuals or organizations in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The Alliance for Justice (AfJ) also offers a training with specific definitions of grassroots/direct lobbying and related guidelines called [Public Charities Can Lobby: How Your 501\(c\)\(3\) Can Influence Policy for the Greater Good](#) (\$80).

Other resources for federal and state advocacy and grassroots/direct lobbying include:

- [IRS Guidance for Nonprofit Lobbying](#) (IRS)
- [Federal Law Protects Nonprofit Advocacy and Lobbying](#) (National Council of Nonprofits)
- [State Law Resources: Nonprofit Lobbying](#) (AfJ)
- [Being a Player: A Guide to the IRS Lobbying Regulations for Advocacy Charities](#) (AfJ)
- [AfJ's Influencing Public Policy in the Digital Age](#) (AfJ)
- [Advocacy Check-Up: Nonprofit Self-Assessment](#) (AfJ)

As always, guidance from these sources is not a substitute for legal and financial guidance from your own lawyers and accountants. Free Press Action is not providing legal advice in this document.