

Be a Media Savvy Social Worker

by Alyssa Lotmore, LMSW



Alyssa Lotmore in the recording studio, hosting The Social Workers Radio Talk Show.

If you do not tell your story, someone else will, and they will tell it wrong.” That is what spoken word poet Kane Smego stated during his opening presentation at the 2014 National Association of Social Workers conference. He was referring to his work with adolescents, but that same message can also apply to the social work profession as a whole.

There is often a misunderstanding by those not in the social work profession as to what it is social workers do. The media coverage of social workers often occurs when there are negative reports about performance of those who use the name of social worker but are not in the profession. Although some social workers put themselves in front of the media to advocate and raise awareness, many avoid the media or focus so much on their daily practice that they do not feel as if they have the time to take on yet another task.

As social workers, we have the skills to be successful in the media. These

basic social work skills include empathy, engagement, and advocacy. These skills are also critical as you connect with your audience. If we look at the public as “client,” we can reach countless more individuals by offering information about the issues they may be facing, how to seek help, and tips and tools. In doing so, we can inspire or bring hope, show people that they are not alone, share resources, and foster self-care and help seeking. Sometimes, individuals are trying to help others, and the information shared may create more understanding, fostering peer supports and related strategies.

This article offers snapshots of work at the University at Albany to advance media savvy social work students. The University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY) is taking steps to have social work students become more comfortable with using the media as a tool for advocacy and reaching vast segments of the population who might never consider seeing or using a social worker.

With help from a distinguished alumna and Internet radio host, Kathryn Zox—Your Social Worker with a Microphone™, UAlbany created *The Social Workers Radio Talk Show* on the University’s FM radio station. The show features nationally known experts and authors and addresses social work topics. What makes this show unique is that social work students are able to be involved with the show from either behind the scenes with production or in front of the microphone and on air. We have learned a great deal from Kathryn as she reaches vast segments of the public. Her work offers us new ways to do outreach to populations struggling with life challenges.

The Public as “Client”

There are many social issues that need to be addressed in the public at large. Bullying, aging, health care, depression, and financial worries are just a few. As social workers, we have knowledge of these topics and are able to foster and frame an

interview in a way that will be helpful to others. We are able to ask questions and contribute to the interview through the perspective of both a listener in need and as a facilitating social worker. When we see the public as “client,” we offer information, resources, empathy, and hope. As social workers, we can use the media to discuss those issues we are passionate about and reach vast audiences with information on how to address concerns that may affect them and others.

Building Media Savvy Social Workers

A social work course was created to teach students the skills needed to gain some of these critical media competencies. This course, which debuted in the summer of 2014, provided students with skills in using Internet radio. Such training served as a practice forum to conduct interviews, be interviewed, and gain experience crafting their words to be clear, concise, informative, and engaging.

Practice and Critique

Students learned to adapt their social work skills to the world of radio and other media. They listened to other radio shows and podcast hosts. While listening, they did their own critique of the show as they also worked on their own style for broadcasting. They explored such questions as:

- Were you engaged in the show?
- Did you find the host asked quality questions?
- Were there questions that you would have asked if you were the host?
- Did the guest get the point across?
- As a listener who may be unfamiliar to the topic, was the show easy to understand and follow without the listener being knowledgeable in the field?
- What was your overall impression of the set-up, the production quality, and show content?
- What aspects of the show did you like?
- What aspects would you have changed?

They learned to integrate their own personalities into the show and to be genuine. With the accessibility of modern technology, anyone can create a podcast or show to share knowledge. However,

that does not mean they have the skills to engage the guest and audience so that people want to listen. That ability to inform while being engaging and entertaining makes all the difference.

To gain skills, comfort, and see improvement in a task, it is necessary to practice regularly. The students used Blog Talk Radio (<http://www.blogtalkradio.com>) in the class to conduct interviews, playing them back for peer and self-critiques. Blog Talk Radio is a free Internet radio platform that allows individuals to host their own shows, which can be downloaded and shared. Users have access to a virtual board on an Internet radio station, and guests can call in. It is an effective practice tool, as well, as it can be set up to be private, so live audiences cannot hear the production.

While practicing, students learned that they needed to keep their energy levels high. They were encouraged to sit in front of a mirror and to talk in a somewhat exaggerated way to offset coming across as flat. They were coached to smile and be animated, connected, engaged, and passionate. Social workers have the skills to connect with others. Those skills just have to be transferred to be used on the radio and in other media.

Getting the Message Out

The skills students learned regarding being on the radio were valuable. Yet, there is still more that needs to be done when viewing the public as “client.” Great shows and segments can be created, but the public has to be aware of such programs. A member of a self-started marketing firm was a guest speaker in the course. He spoke to the students about utilizing social media to promote their programs and stressed the importance of networking and continuing to make connections. With tools like Blog Talk Radio, one’s show can be promoted through the Blog Talk website.

Students developed creative show titles and innovative ways to identify themselves on air. They chose current topics that were popular in the news to draw in listeners. Students were also exposed to search engine optimization techniques, such as tagging, to increase visibility on Google and Bing.

Whether or not students end up hosting their own radio show or podcast, the skills learned will be beneficial in their everyday professional social

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work practice. Skills developed in radio interviewing help to communicate more effectively with clients, community members, donors, political figures, and others.

Social workers can be media savvy. We need to educate the public, engage new segments of our community in problem solving, and advance new understanding of pressing concerns and the resources, services, and supports to address them. In doing so, we also elevate our profession so the general public knows more about who we are and what we do.

Sources

Zox, K. (2014, August 9). “Media Savvy Social Work.” Personal interview.

Resources

- BlogTalkRadio: <http://www.blogtalkradio.com>
- The Social Workers Radio Talk Show (UAlbany): <http://www.albany.edu/the-social-workers/>
- Kathryn Zox: <http://www.kathrynzox.com>

Alyssa Lotmore, LMSW, is a graduate of the State University of New York at Albany. She is currently employed at her alma mater, serving as the Assistant Director and Coordinator of Baccalaureate Field Education. She is also the co-host of UAlbany’s The Social Workers Radio Talk Show and the instructor of the Media Savvy Social Work course.

