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When lawmakers (or others) attack -- The threat to investigative centers

Handout from Andy Hall and Lauren Fuhrmann, Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism

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Prepare and respond: A checklist

Before the attack:

- Develop a [clear mission and statement of values](#) for your news organization. Put it on your website.
- Adopt a [policy requiring financial transparency](#). Put it on your website, along with a full list of [financial supporters](#) and your [990s](#).
- Devise metrics for charting the reach and impact of your work, and put the data on your website. Make it attractive with [interactive tables and maps](#).
- Devote a website page to summarizing the [impact](#) of your work.
- If you employ interns, [keep track of them](#) as their careers take shape. Devote a website page to their successes -- another form of impact.
- Nurture personal relationships with your journalistic partners, including editors and station managers whose newsrooms will use your work -- and produce high-impact, award-winning stories, collaborating with them when feasible and generously sharing credit when things go right. Show up for trade shows, conferences, parties and awards ceremonies. Better yet, lead events and present panels.
- Nurture personal relationships with your academic partners, including administrators, professors and students -- and go out of your way to satisfy their requests for collaboration. Offer guest lectures and show up for others' lectures, conferences, parties and gatherings.
- Enter contests, and [publicize](#) any awards.
- Strive for financial diversity to demonstrate that you're not beholden to a single or small number of financial supporters.
- Produce a detailed, [downloadable fact sheet](#) about your organization's operations and finances.

When attacked:

- Drop everything else. This is your new life, at least for a while.
- Speed matters. Compose a brief statement, quickly. You can add to it later. Post it on your website and push it out through email lists and social media.
- Assign a staff member or volunteer to answer the phones, another to update the website regularly, another to handle social media.

- Determine who should speak for your organization -- the CEO, board president, others?
- Take the high road; don't retaliate with personal attacks or speculation, or resort to inflammatory language. There's time to ratchet up the rhetoric later, if necessary.
- Don't obsess about the motivations behind the attack. Your allies will do that for you. Your job is to focus on the attack's effect on your organization's mission of producing news coverage and training the next generation of investigative journalists (or however you articulate the mission).
- [Tell your story](#) to anyone who will listen. Especially, accept requests from radio talk shows or news organizations that may be hostile to your newsroom; it's important to be seen and heard within those audiences. You may find that by speaking with them, you develop some [surprising allies](#).
- Use your website as a clearinghouse for dependable, up-to-date information. Create a [resource page](#) and keep it up to date.
- Recognize any fundraising or partnership-building opportunities created by the crisis. Should you send out a targeted fundraising appeal? Lemons can produce lemonade.
- Engage the board of directors, early and often, for strategic thinking and on-the-ground lobbying and networking. Be sure to involve your legal counsel and CPA as well.
- Consider an [online petition](#), launched either by your organization or by a supporter. Make sure the names and email addresses can be saved for later communications or fundraising.
- Use your [newsletter](#) to speak in a direct, personal way to your allies. And to organize your coverage for them.
- Activate your social media channels -- [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and others.
- Engage your journalistic and academic allies in writing [statements of support](#), producing editorials, editorial cartoons and columns, and reaching out to their constituents.
- Keep track of any lobbying expenses for reporting on your 990. Know the [IRS limits and guidelines](#) on lobbying, including: "An organization will be regarded as attempting to influence legislation if it contacts, or urges the public to contact, members or employees of a legislative body for the purpose of proposing, supporting, or opposing legislation, or if the organization advocates the adoption or rejection of legislation."
- Find ways to emerge even stronger -- thriving rather than just surviving. Leverage your organization's higher profile to raise the quality of its journalism and the sustainability of its financial operations. Convert people who spoke out on behalf of the center, or signed petitions, into financial supporters and followers of your coverage and newsletters.
- Your major funders may contact you to express support and ask for a ground-level report. You may wish to contact them, too. Be ready with a concise summary.
- When the crisis subsides, reflect on how well your preparations and responses protected your organization's interests. Any room for improvement before the next attack?