



The National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and
Secular Student Societies

*A Guide to Press
and Publicity*

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Introduction

Attempting to promote your society can be quite intimidating, and it's not always clear how to best go about it. This guide aims to help make things easier by outlining:

- What opportunities there are for your society in the press
- How best to take advantage of these opportunities
- How else you can go about publicising your society

If you need any further advice or assistance in promoting your society, or would like to offer feedback for this guide, please do not hesitate to contact the AHS Press Officer at press@ahsstudents.org.uk.

Press opportunities

It is definitely possible for AHS student societies to gain publicity both locally and nationally, as well as in their student press. There are many advantages to getting your society in the press, not least the fact that it looks great! It can help to establish your society, attracting more members from within your university and the local community, and giving you the ability to work with other groups. National press and an increased membership can help your society attract better speakers.

STUDENT PRESS

Student press is, by definition, always interested in the activities of student societies, especially if you are doing something big or controversial. Make sure to look into both official and unofficial newspapers, radio stations and websites.

The types of things that student press will cover can take many forms – they will be interested in events, interviewing high profile speakers and covering campaigns. For example, Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society [had an article on their 2011 Reason Week](#) in the Palatinate, the University's official student paper, and Warwick Atheists managed to get on the front page of the Boar, their University's student paper, after winning Best Society Award 2007/08.

PALATINATE
The Official Durham Student Newspaper

HOME NEWS SPORT POLITICS COMMENT CAREERS PROFILE REVIEWS LIFESTYLE

Home » Durham News, Featured

Reason week round-up

21 FEBRUARY 2011

by Hannah Shaddock

Last week, Durham hosted a programme of events exploring religion and secularism in the modern world, as part of Reason Week 2011.

Organised by Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society, the week aimed to "promote and discuss the ideas of humanism and secularism, and to enable all students [...] to assess their beliefs in the context of a modern society".

The highlight of the week's schedule was a speech by A.C. Grayling, in association with the Durham Union Society (DUS). Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College in London, Grayling spoke on a variety of topics, mainly covering reason and its philosophical basis throughout history, as well as the ways reason

THE BOAR
FIFTH WHEEL'S ON FIRE

I DON'T BELIEVE IT!

Warwick Atheists win 'Best New Society' for 2007/2008 and proclaim to the online public: "We fucking rock".

News, pp. 04-05
Lifestyle, pp. 20-21
Science, p. 37

Be sure to establish contact with your student press, and if possible establish relationships with particular reporters and editors. This should help make it easier to get coverage for your activities, and also will ensure that when a news story comes up that is appropriate for you to comment on (for example, what the CU are up to), the press will be more likely to approach you about this story. Provide them with your phone

number as well as email, for more immediate comment.

You could also offer to write something for a comment/opinion section. For example, 2010-11 LSE Atheist and Humanist Society President Catherine Capone wrote a comment piece for the Beaver, the newspaper of LSE SU, [on the British Humanist Association's Census Campaign](#).

newspaper of the LSE Students' Union

theBeaver

News Features Comment Sport Social PartB Photos Blogs

If you're not religious, then for God's sake say so

by Catherine Capone ON 20 MARCH 2011 IN COMMENT

This week the 2011 census forms were sent out to every person in the country. The forms still contain the same 'religion?' Despite strong protests against the presumptuous nature of the question, the Office of National Statistics' controversy stems from the fact that the question implies the respondent adheres to a specific creed. In the 2001 they were Christian and only 15 per cent that they had no religion. But in other surveys in which the question belonging to any particular religion?, the number of people who answered 'no religion' was significantly higher. A survey conducted the same year revealed that only 51 per cent of the population called themselves Christian. Another BSA Survey revealed that over 50 per cent of the population had no religion.

This disparity arises from a large number of 'cultural Christians', i.e. people who merely have a loose affiliation with a religious school, have Christian parents, or simply consider themselves Christian because they go to church. These people would be more likely to tick 'no religion' if asked a less leading question: There is a god whom they affiliate themselves with. It is unclear what the census is actually measuring with its question 'What is your religion?' Does it matter? Is it a problem that people tick the religion box when they are not in fact religious? The government collected it 'used to help plan and fund services for your community – services like transport, education and health – and to implement far more dubious elements into our society. The 2001 census statistics on religion were used in Britain (even though 42 per cent of the population are against any form of faith school according to the latest BSA survey) than to secular groups, to retain religious privilege in equality laws and – most infuriating – to justify the existence of the House of Lords. These unselected gibbous have a say in making or dismantling our laws and have a

LOCAL PRESS

Local press is ideal for student societies, enabling you to attract people and groups from within the local community, as well as the University. You can get in touch with your local papers, local radio and BBC News online.

Newspapers

As with student papers, it is often useful to give local newspapers your contact details – both your email and also your phone number, due to its immediacy – even if you don't anticipate the newspaper featuring your society in the short term. By doing this, if the newspaper has a story which is related to religion or belief, or your university, they will be able to contact you for a quote easily – a key part of getting your society into the press is by making it easy for the press to get to you! With your contact details, explain about your society, and include a link to a website or similar. You could even try this with national press – Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society got a quote in the Telegraph with this method! Remember, they don't want to have to work hard for the story!

Top Tip - Unchanging emails

If possible, set up a society email, and provide the press with this address. That way, when the society's President/Press Officer changes, the email address won't, and so the press will still be able to get in touch.

If you have an idea, go straight to the papers! You can turn a lot of things into a narrative, as opposed to just a description of events, which is less likely to be successful. So for example, if you've had a Reason Week, talk about the unique size of the event, a campaign that was part of it, or some controversy surrounding it.

If possible, send a short summary of the story to specific people in appropriate areas as well as the editors – it may catch the eyes of a specific journalist, while an editor is likely to be very busy and may ignore smaller

stories. If you can, tailor the email to the recipient in some way, as it is more likely to draw their interest. So when sending it to a religious correspondent, focus more on philosophical work and interfaith. And for local news, stress the local aspect and things you've done in the community.


It is often easier to get published if you write something yourself. Letters to the editor can bring welcome publicity to your society if you focus on a relevant campaign/issue. You can bring in your society as a secondary point.

Radio

Most of the points in the preceding section are also relevant to radio – let them know that you exist and are available, and ring in if something relevant comes up!

BBC News online

The regional BBC web pages are often interested in student events if they can be pitched as having to do with the wider population, or a wider issue or campaign. They are often happy to let you write articles yourself, and will be willing to edit the story for you. For an example, take a look at ex-Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society President Paul Taylor's [piece on their 2011 Reason Week](#) for BBC Wear.



The screenshot shows the BBC Wear website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'BBC' logo and links for News, Sport, Weather, iPlayer, TV, Radio, and More. Below that, the 'WEAR' logo is prominent. The main content area features a news article titled 'Humanist and secularist Durham students take on reason' by Paul Taylor, Former president of Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society. The article text reads: 'The last decade has seen religious observance continuing to decline in the UK, especially amongst young people. At the same time, chart-topping books by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have raised the profile of non-religious beliefs systems. Despite this increased publicity, many people perceive non-religious stances such as Humanism as purely negative in nature, offering no alternative to the communities provided by the religious groups it criticises. Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society (DUHSS) has been'. To the right of the article is a 'REASON WEEK' logo featuring a stylized flame above the text. A sidebar on the right contains a 'MORE FROM WEAR' section with links for NEWS, SPORT, WEATHER, TRAVEL, and SEE ALSO, which includes 'Durham students are b' and '17 Feb 11 | Wear'. At the bottom of the sidebar, there's an 'ELSEWHERE ON THE W' section with links for Durham University and DUHSS.

NATIONAL PRESS

As well as local press, you could explore getting your society in the national press, as well as all over the internet.

National papers

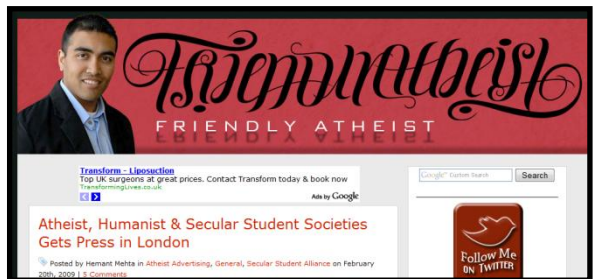
You may have the opportunity to get quoted in the national papers, as Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society secretary Benjamin Lewis was in the Telegraph in October 2010, when the Tony Blair Faith Foundation set up its 'Faith and Globalisation' course at the University. These opportunities are rarer, but when they present themselves, don't hesitate to work out who the relevant journalist likely to cover the story will be, to find their contact details and to send them a quote. The AHS can help you with this.



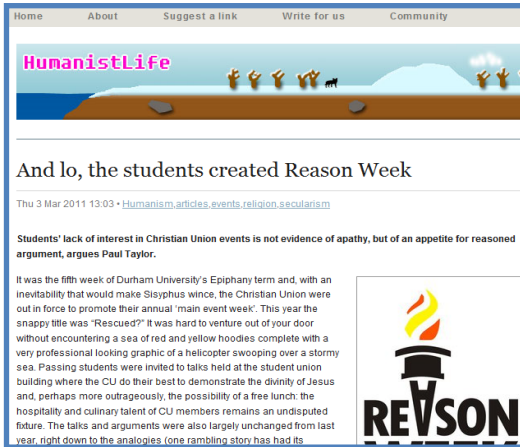
Other internet press

The internet has plenty of opportunities for student societies, and is very easy to access. It is also arguably less work to get into than other outlets.

Publicity for your society over the Internet can be very effective, it being easy for people to access, and having the possibility of being directly linked to and shared. Readers can also comment on it, allowing your members to feel a greater part of the society, and people from other groups can give you valuable advice, ideas, and feedback.

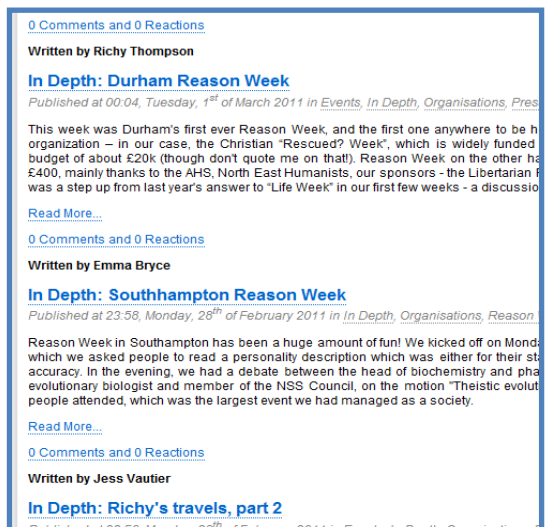


Many blogs are related to atheist, humanist, and secularist issues, and would be happy for you to perhaps guest-blog, or to cover an interesting story themselves. Examples include the [Friendly Atheist](#), who covered the [AHS Press Launch](#), and the [2010 Oxford Think Week](#).



The BHA's community blog [HumanistLife](#) often covers student-related news and stories. For example, stories on [Oxford Think Week 2010](#) and [Durham Reason Week 2011](#) were published, and the AHS itself has also had [other articles included](#). If you want to get an article, simply email [Bob Churchill](#) with ideas, or with a post of your own.

The AHS has its own newsletter, which goes out weekly to students across the country, as well as other interested parties. We also post all stories on our website. We are always pleased to cover specific stories about societies on both platforms. You could also look into writing an "In Depth" feature for the newsletter about your society or your activities. Contact the AHS's Press Officer at press@ahsstudents.org.uk for details.



How best to deal with the press

While it is often said that all publicity is good publicity, it is important to ensure that any press your society receives reflects you well, and that your story is actually published!

Give them a story!

Reporters want something new/controversial/different – they need something that will interest people that aren't directly involved – which could mean non-students and people outside the AHS movement.

There are plenty of ways to go about this – for example, something controversial like 'smut for smut', a general cause which affects non-students like halal meat or abortion, something that the public can attend (like a Reason Week), or a 'human interest' type story such as charity work.

Sound-bites are your friend!

Reporters often cut out material in order to save space, to fit the context better, or to remove things they see as irrelevant.

To make sure this doesn't cause problems for you, and so that they have less work, make sure that you avoid long and sustained argument, unless you know the publication will want to use it (like HumanistLife, or a discussion based article).

For example, the typical [BHA press release](#) contains a quick recap of the situation, along with one or two paragraph-length quotes from a member of staff – which is the bit you want the press [to actually pass on](#) to their readers.

Be persistent!

If you want to get a story published, it is crucial that you are persistent. When pitching a story, get in touch with every possible outlet, individually if possible (if not, BCC them), with the pitch. This can work well both over the phone, and by email, though with a phone call, you can more easily adapt to requirements. As suggested earlier, tailor your focus to the audience – local news needs local interest, while a correspondent will be more interested in a wider campaign you are involved in.

Be contactable!

It is important for a journalist to be able to get in touch with you easily – if they can't, they will likely move onto another source. It's therefore important for you to be available for comments at short notice. A good way of doing this is to give out the phone numbers of a couple of designated people in your society, plus more than one email address, so that there are several possible alternatives.

Represent your society well!

It is crucial that you are careful with your society's image – with outspoken atheism having a negative image amongst a large section of the populace, remember to avoid the 'militant atheist' image, unless you particularly wish to be associated with this!

One idea is to focus and stress areas on which there is more widespread agreement, that are harder to object to – examples include secularism (with emphasis that you fully support the right to private belief and worship), initiatives such as interfaith and charity work, and many of the tenets of Humanism, such as doing good without religion. **Focus on what you are for, not what you are against!**

Other publicity opportunities

As well as getting featured in the wider media world, it is important for your society to be well publicised within your University. This is, after all, where most of your potential members come from, as well as people who may attend larger events from time to time.

ONLINE METHODS OF GETTING PUBLICITY

The internet is the perfect place to publicise your society, it being free, and with people being able to share links, events, and stories. You can promote your society through your University and Student Union, through a website, blog and mailing list, through Facebook, through Twitter and through other societies.

University and Student Union

Your University and Student Union may have websites that will give information about affiliated societies. This is an important resource, as it is likely to be one of the first places people check for society information, particularly freshers looking to decide which societies to join – so make sure you are included in this. Ensure it includes a link to your society's Facebook group, website, an email address and a description of what you do.

Similarly, the Student Union may have a University-wide calendar of events, which it can be helpful to be included in – it will remind your current members of events, and possibly attract new members who would not have previously considered your society.

Your University may have a method of allowing you to email all the other students at your University. For example, at Oxford, you can email an event to your Common Room secretary, who passes it on to all the other Common Room secretaries, who in turn tell the students at their college.

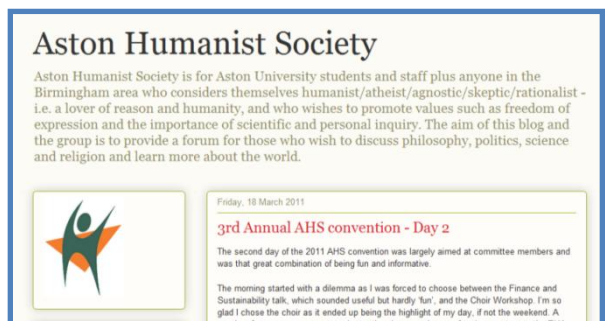
If your University has departmental mailing lists, it is often possible to get them to send out information about your events. Make sure to send information out appropriately – if you have a science-based talk, send an email to science departments, and so on. This can give you access to people that would be interested in your events, but had not previously considered your society to be relevant to them.

This can also work with groups such as chaplains and interfaith groups, who may forward out an email for you if they can see that it is relevant to their members.

Website and blog

Having your own website and/or blog is something that has worked very well for many AHS societies, enabling them to set out who they are, when they meet and what they stand for, to document their activities, and also to discuss campaigns and other news. A site can also provide a creative outlet for your members, with many societies (such as [Aston Humanist Society](#) and [UCLU Atheist, Secularist & Humanist Society](#)) running successful op/ed blogs.

Blogs are quick, easy, and free to set up through [Blogger](#) or [WordPress](#), and can be helpful in promoting your society through social networking, and to your own members. The AHS will often link to blogs that are particularly interesting.



Domains are very cheap to register - £7 for two years is typical for a “.org.uk” domain from [123-reg](#).

Top Tip - Free hosting from the BHA

Once your society is affiliated to the AHS (more on that later!), you can also affiliate to the [British Humanist Association](#) (BHA) for free. One of the things the BHA provides to their affiliated groups is free web hosting!

Mailing list

Mailing lists are another useful method of publicising your society to interested parties, giving them the latest news of your events and plans, and helping them to feel part of the society,

Try and ensure emails go out each and every week, so people know when to expect them.

Look out for opportunities throughout to plug the list, including mentioning it on Facebook, and on your website. Come freshers’ fair, you will sign up loads of people – for example, Oxford Atheists, Secularists and Humanists got 510 at their 2009 fair!

If possible, also have a tick box giving people the chance to sign up to the AHS Newsletter!

Add people such as interfaith groups, chaplains, and other societies with similar interests, so that they can promote your events – make sure you get their permissions first.

Be sure to add press@ahsstudents.org.uk so we can put your events in the AHS Newsletter!

Facebook

Facebook is an obvious publicity opportunity for any society. It is the **most vital** place for your society, and will provide the primary hub of all your activities. Set up a group or page (both have their advantages but a group is probably better) and invite all your friends who might be interested. It is important to have your own group so that you can message all members at once about events, campaigns, and other news. This will also allow your members to interact with you and each other, talking outside of meetings and sharing interesting links and ideas, thereby keeping a more long-term interest and ownership of the society going.

Make sure you make a Facebook event each time you do something, as opposed to just sending out a message. This way, when you've existed for a while, prospective members can look at your past events and get a good idea of how active your society is, and the kind of things you get up to.

Similarly, be sure to put up lots of pictures, and post links to the wall yourself!

You can also get people to all change their profile picture for a bigger event, perhaps to your Reason Week logo, in order to increase awareness.

It's often a good idea to post links on freshers' groups for subjects, halls, colleges, or for the university at large – this is a popular practice for religious groups, so it's good to show freshers that an alternative exists, and to get them interested before they even arrive at University.

Twitter

Twitter is becoming increasingly popular amongst students. You could promote your society using hash-tags:



[SecularOU](#) SecularOU Students

A [#Secular](#) minded Student with the [#OpenUniversity](#)? Why not join [@SecularOU](#) [#SecularStudents](#) [#Secularism](#) [#Atheists](#) [#Atheism](#) [#Humanism](#)

Tweet at other people to get them to also promote your society:



[SecularOU](#) SecularOU Students

[@ahsstudents](#) [@BHAnews](#) Could you RT? [@SecularOU](#) is the new society for atheists, humanists and secular minded students within the Open Uni.

Top Tip - Support the AHS

You can like the AHS on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/the.ahs/>

And follow us on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/ahsstudents/>

We'd be happy to tweet about your new society, or post a message on our Facebook wall about you!

OFFLINE METHODS OF GETTING PUBLICITY

There are several ways of attracting offline publicity – putting up posters around campus, flyering outside the SU, and through freshers' fair.

Top Tip - Design a good logo

Having a good logo is an important place to start! An eye-catching logo can be a great way to attract members to your society, so make sure you have one! More on how best to go about this can be seen in the AHS's guide, [How to Start and Run a Society](#).

Posters

There are many occasions when a society needs to create posters – upon launching, advertising events, at Freshers Fair, and so on. They will be vital each and every week.

Posters can be put in many places – in your Student Union, around campus, in halls, and on relevant departmental notice boards. There may also be a notice board specifically for student societies. Many Universities have strict rules (with fines) for posters put up in certain locations, so make sure you check first!

It is often possible to display posters in digital form as screensavers across your University's computers, or on TV screens across the University – speak to your IT department about this one, but note you may have to pay!

It is important to keep general posters new and interesting – many societies have representatives whose job it is to ensure that posters in their area of the university are regularly updated. You could also come up with new posters for each specific event, giving the details of that event in particular.

A poster concept that has worked very well for several societies is guerrilla advertising, printing large and bold provocative quotes on posters in order to catch the eye and to provoke debate and interest, with a small section inviting potential members to get in touch. One advantage here is that black and white posters cost less than colour! These quotes may not be things that your society would necessarily agree with – they are there to promote debate, and you could point this out on your poster if you wish. As well as

The Importance of **Atheism**



An evening, hosted by the Warwick Atheists Society, of talks given by atheist students on Campus, on topics such as:

- Persecution and atheism
- Religious repression of sexuality
- The maltreatment of women by religion
- A lot more...

If you're sick and tired of hearing 'it's my faith' used as a smokescreen for ridiculous viewpoints, come and take a look at what we have to say.

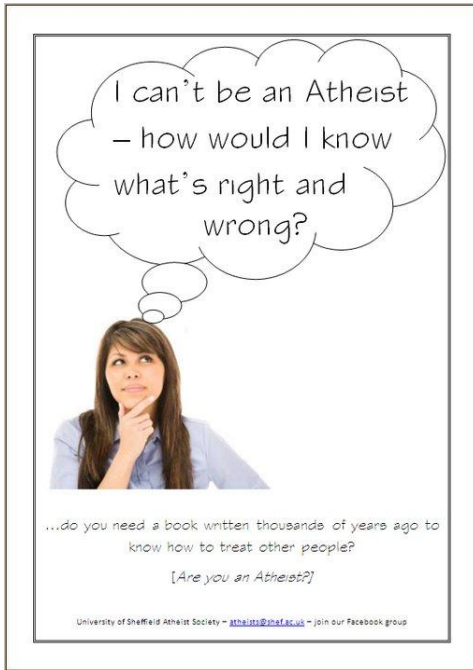
Wednesday, March 12, 2008

3pm - 7pm

RO.3/4

It's time to take out the trash.

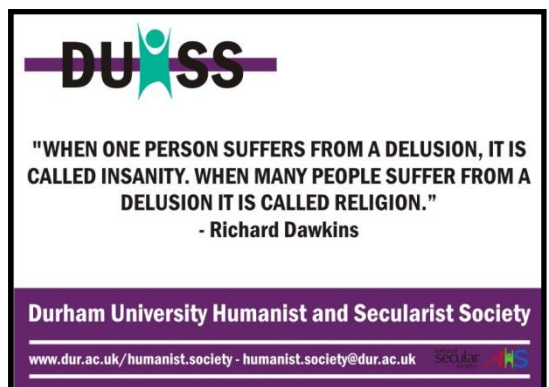
quotes, Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society has enjoyed using provocative slogans such as “We are the people the Pope warned you about”.



Similarly, the University of Sheffield Atheist Society has created posters which combat common misconceptions about atheists, for instance questioning arguments such as atheists lacking morality, and atheists hating religion.

Warwick Atheists designed a poster showing various religious symbols being binned, with the tagline, “It’s time to take out the trash.” This poster caused complaints from their University’s CU, and the society subsequently had their recently-won “Best New Society” award taken away!

With regard to designing a poster, the key rule is KISS – “Keep It Simple, Stupid”. This relates firstly to content - It is essential that someone viewing the poster understands what you want to communicate. For that reason, a sensible starting point is to list the information you want to communicate, ignoring any information that your target audience doesn't need. For instance, when you wish to advertise a debate, you don't need to include the aims or selling points of your society unless they are strictly relevant.



Similarly, if you are a well-established society within your university, it is unlikely that you need to explain who you are and what you do on the poster – your logo and name may do that for you.

KISS also applies to design – a poster needs to attract attention to itself by its design – perfect content is irrelevant if it isn't read. Try looking at your design from across the room. Does it stand out? Is it easy to read? Can you tell what it's about?

To make it easier to read, it is important to have the lowest possible amount of words on the poster so people don't have to stop to understand and remember it. Another tip here is to include blank space – while it may appear as wasted space, it gives a less cluttered and more professional look to your design.

Colour is always useful in poster design – it can catch the eye, as well as link the poster to your society if you have a consistent colour of branding. However, too much colour is never a good idea – it's likely to clash and look overly childish, giving you a poor image. It's best to stick to just a few colours – even go as far as having just 2 or 3, which can give a bold look that's easy to print in black and white if necessary and still look good, unlike photos.

One way to easily produce very professional looking posters is to ensure that they are pleasing to the eye by 'leading' the eye around the page between your focal points. A good way to do this is producing a 'visual triangle'. These three points could be, for instance, your logo (small), the event information (medium), and an image or piece of text (large). Otherwise, the whole design could be based on the triangle itself, for instance in [this case](#). Similarly, it is often useful to adhere to the more commonly known 'rule of thirds', which involves splitting your page into thirds in each direction, then using the resulting grid to position items. This can be seen [here](#), and is studied in more detail [here](#). Both of these rules can be seen in paintings, buildings, photography and even in nature, they being based on the [golden ratio](#), forming the golden rectangle.

To conclude, poster design can be problematic, but the best way to judge a design is to see whether it looks 'right' or 'natural' to you, then ensure that it suits its purpose.

Flyers

Flyers can have more information on them, but should still be simple and appealing. Whilst posters are stuck in one place, just hanging on the wall, you can stand in prominent locations on campus (for example, outside your SU) and hand out flyers to everyone who passes by. (Again, check it's allowed first!) A time-consuming, but much more direct approach.

Freshers' fair

Freshers' fair is a vital time for promoting your society, and is when you will get most of the sign-ups to your mailing list – if not most of your members! A well-designed stall, with helpful literature detailing the aims activities of your society, is vital.

Top Tip - Use the AHS's guide

If you are trying to launch a society at freshers' fair, you may find the AHS's guide, [How to Run a Successful Freshers' Week](#), useful.

Other University groups

There are many advantages to working with other societies you share common ground with – for example the philosophy society, LGBT society, feminist society, Amnesty society, debating society, science societies, political societies and religious societies may be willing to promote your societies' events to their members. Events could include film nights, debates, socials, or talks by a mutually interesting speaker. It could be a pairing in which both participants can add something – for example, most societies have held interfaith events with faith societies. Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society worked with Durham Union Society – while the Union

organised most of the evening as usual, DUHSS worked with them on contacting and organising speakers, as well as advertising the debate itself. A main benefit here is that you can promote your society amongst people who wouldn't normally know about it.

Top Tip - Use the AHS's guide

For more information on interfaith events, be sure to check out the AHS's [A Guide to Interfaith](#).

Local groups

You can often work with local groups in a similar way to groups within your University:

- [British Humanist Association-affiliated local Humanist groups](#) and [Humanist Society of Scotland local groups](#) typically have a mixture of socials and guest speakers – much like student groups – and meet at least twice a month.
- [Skeptics in the Pub groups](#) meet once a month, in a pub, almost always with a guest speaker.
- [Café Scientifique groups](#) meet once a month in bars and cafés, with a guest speaker, and discuss science!
- [Sea of Faith Network groups](#) aim to explore religious faith as a human creation, and groups typically meet once a month.

For example, Oxford Atheists, Humanists and Secularists cross-promote with Oxford Humanists, Oxford Sea of Faith and Oxford Skeptics in the Pub, and together the groups organise [Oxford Think Week](#) every year. Working with such groups increases awareness of your society within the local community and allows you to hold better events so as to attract more people. You can also promote events of these societies, which are likely to be of interest to your members, and coordinate your event schedules to avoid clashes. Over time, you may find these groups will provide sustainability to your society, by

acting as a backup for the “societal memory”, providing support when the society goes through harder times due to personnel changes.

Other methods of publicising your society

A great opportunity is selling merchandise to members, which in essence gives you walking advertisements of your society! This will increase awareness of your society across campus, as well as making members feel like a greater part of your society. Merchandise could include wristbands, badges, t-shirts, hoodies, and anything else you think your members would be interested in. For example, Leeds Atheist Society produce two hoodies a year. University of Southampton Atheist Society has also produced hoodies. And Oxford Atheists, Humanists and Secularists produce new clothing every Think Week.

As well as including your logo, you could allow members to personalise hoodies and t-shirts with quotes on the back. As well as this, you could sell advertising space on your merchandise, which increases income, as well as again associating your society with a strong brand image.

To conclude...

- It’s easier than you think to get your society into the press – just try it!
- It’s essential to keep your society in the public eye in and around your University, both so that your year is a success, and to help ensure the longevity of your society.
- Above all, be creative, and have fun!

Good luck and have fun!

Written by Emma Bryce

with contributions from Richy Thompson

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