Speaking to the Media

Develop answers to difficult media interview questions before you attend demonstrations. Don’t put it off, hoping that inspiration will strike at the moment when the microphone is thrust in your face. It’s good to use the same answers as your friends – that increases the chances that the sound bites you worked out together will actually get into print or on the air.

An additional reason for working out answers in advance, is that what you say to the press can be used in court against people who are arrested – such as you and your friends. Even if you yourself are prepared to accept the consequences of whatever you say, you may be changing the fate of others. Be particularly careful about questions which imply that you believe you’re doing something wrong, or that you’re acting with ill-will or carelessness. For example:

Question: Did you come here to get arrested?
Answer: I’m not “here to get arrested.” We don’t want to go to jail, but we’re willing to risk our freedom to help abolish the death penalty.

Don’t feel obliged to answer a difficult question – you can reply with one of your sound bites, even if it doesn’t match the question. For example:

Question: How many of these people are going to get arrested?
Answer: We’re here to protect the last surviving groves of ancient redwood trees.

And there’s always the classic response:

I’d rather not be interviewed. Would you like me to introduce you to __________, our media liaison?

Listen for negative assumptions underlying a question. Bring them out into the open and neutralize them. For example:

Question: Aren’t you disappointed by the small turnout today?
Answer: Actually, we’re amazed at how many people showed up, on such short notice.

Question: Do you think your beliefs entitle you to
break the law?

Answer: Sometimes we do have to break a small law, in order to protect our liberty or our lives. That’s the principle of civil disobedience, as developed by two great Americans: Henry Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Additional Difficult Questions:

Aren’t you concerned about the huge cost to the district, to arrest all these protesters?

Do you have a job? Do you pay taxes?

With all the legal ways to make your opinion known – marches, public speaking, petitions, letter-writing, voting, etc. – why do you insist on breaking the law?