

working with the
MEDIA

> a best practice guide



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Introduction

Communicating research findings to potential users outside the academic community, whether in government, business, Third Sector or the general public, has, or at least should become, an essential element in most social scientists' working lives. Engaging with the media enables you not just to reach 'opinion formers', the public and their academic peers, it is also the most effective way of:

- communicating research to potential users
- raising your profile
- getting involved in wider public debate
- meeting the broader obligations of accountability that are incumbent on all publicly funded researchers.

This publication provides some practical guidelines on how you can engage with the media in order to have a greater impact on the national debate. It will also provide you with information about:

- what makes a good news story
- working effectively with journalist
- writing press releases
- giving TV and radio interviews
- working with radio and TV documentary makers.

Why should you develop a media strategy?

Can social science survive without the media? Whilst the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is in the business of funding research of the highest quality across a broad range of topics, it is also in the business of knowledge transfer, enhancing the public understanding of social science and communicating that research to people who can make use of it.

These days, more and more academics and their institutions want to communicate with users of their research. Whether the goal is to influence policy and practice, to justify public funding for their work or to tap into additional resources and networks that will contribute to the research process, the importance and value of disseminating results to the widest possible audience is now almost universally recognised. However, this requires an overarching communications strategy, and at the heart of this should be a carefully articulated media strategy that enables social scientists and their institutions, to both exploit any media opportunities and avoid potential pitfalls.

A good media strategy starts with you considering the target audiences for your research output and defining the most effective ways of reaching them through the media. It should address how you can use the media, in general, to publicise your research and influence debate. And, once the media's attention has been gained, it should help you decide how to develop further ideas for contributing to the public debate. Your strategy should also specify the resources, both financial and human, that you will need to promote your findings and manage any feedback.

Drawing up a media strategy is very much dependent on the nature of the research, the institutional framework, your personal contacts etc. It is always important to bear in mind that a media strategy is just one component in a larger communications strategy. The ESRC has drawn up a very useful template for drafting such a strategy which can be found as part of the ESRC's Communications Toolkit on the ESRC's website.

To effectively communicate your research and change perceptions, you need to be innovative and go for your target audiences through the media. There are many different publics for research, but the press and broadcast media form the most visible route to reach them. They are the conduits to the ultimate users of research – policymakers, commercial organisations, non-profits and the general public. Successful engagement with the media requires a deliberate consideration of strategy and resources. What's more:

- To influence policy, social scientists have no choice but to engage with the media. The public profile it provides establishes a reputation for advice, which policymakers may follow up. Indeed, for politicians in particular, a piece of research may only become 'real' when it has appeared in a newspaper: they will then need to absorb it since they may be asked about it or have it quoted against them.
- Media coverage can also help with raising additional funding for research, attracting offers of consultancy work and/or promoting the name of your institution. As higher education becomes more of a marketplace and universities compete more vigorously to attract funds and good students, it is conceivable that your remuneration will be influenced by your contribution to your university's public image.
- Attention from the media can also raise the public profile of your discipline. Social scientists, traditionally seen by journalists as poor communicators, can now try to reverse that opinion and increase public discussion of social science research.
- Coverage in the media may make it easier to gather data and case studies for further research. Nowadays, users play a valuable role not simply as recipients of the end results but as contributors of ideas, contacts, different perspectives, even data resources throughout the research process.

- Meeting the challenge of explaining in a limited space and to a general audience why research is important as it helps to focus your thinking and sharpen your research agenda. Working with the media can also be a lot of fun and offer a new challenge and a new impetus to the development of your career.

Choosing your targets

A key part of the media strategy is establishing your target audiences. Only then can decisions be made as to which publications and on which programmes – from the vast range of print, broadcast and online outlets – should be prioritised. Obviously the central targets will be those with the greatest impact and the greatest number of readers or viewers. These tend to be the national broadsheets, the major weeklies, the main news and current affairs programmes on terrestrial TV and radio and the main news websites. It's worth bearing in mind that major news outlets such as the BBC, the *Guardian* or *The Times* carry far more material online than offline, and this online material attracts a different, but frequently significant audience. It is also worth thinking about more niche outlets such as specialist publications, local press and media elsewhere in the world.

In thinking through your target media, you should make a clear distinction between those where there is a real shortage of space – the quality press and top TV and radio programmes – and those with space to fill such as rolling news channels, start-up TV channels and online. With the former, there will be intense competition to get coverage for any stories; with the latter, it should be considerably easier and though the audiences reached are smaller, they are still valuable for the experience and contacts that will be gained. Additionally, these media play a valuable role as 'feeder media' for other major news outlets. Most news rooms will have a rolling news channel on and will actively monitor them for ideas.

Ultimately the media industry exists to make money. Editors and broadcast producers want to sell the most papers or win ratings wars. This does not mean that the media does not fulfil many valuable roles, most obviously, making the public aware of local, national and international issues which affect their lives. Nor does it mean that those individual journalists who make up the media are not passionate about portraying information accurately and for the greater good.

But it is always worth remembering that media outlets are predominately driven by sales – they have their own agenda, their own customers and their own unique selling points. They are not a free service for disseminating information. Understanding this helps explain why some topics get mass coverage, while others which are arguably as important, if not more so, get very little. However, economics aside, the media is a very powerful, quick and effective way of communicating messages to millions of people worldwide. Stories covered in the media shape public opinion and influence policy.

There are also many websites that are keen to receive 'content' and will respond favourably to offers of well-written accessible presentations of social science research findings. This is often a valuable alternative publication route to trying to place a feature article in the national newspapers (a difficult undertaking unless you are a 'name'). Online articles also attract the attentions of search engines and news accumulators, such as Google News and Yahoo News, so can reach a far wider audience than the readers of the initial website where the article was posted. Of course, online, there is no shortage of space.

It is important that once you have chosen your targets to familiarise yourself with them. That means regularly looking through the full range of national newspapers and looking for the key ingredients of the news stories they carry. It also means watching the programmes that cover social science topics and considering the angles they take and what commentators they use. Overall it means you need to both keep up to date with the news and also begin to see how your research might fit into the national news agenda.

Creating your own media contacts database

Following the media in this way will also lead to you getting to know the journalists who cover your subject area. It might be difficult to have an impact on the editor of *The Times*, for example, but interesting the economics correspondent, the social affairs correspondent, the public policy correspondent, the crime correspondent, the health correspondent, is less of a challenge.

It is a good idea to maintain a database of relevant journalists. This can be done by making use of the variety of printed and electronic media directories such as *MediaDisk*. News databases such as *LexisNexis* or *Newsbank* also makes it much easier for creating and maintaining a personal database of relevant articles and those journalists who write them. Reading the newspapers and noting who is writing about what will also help you to compile a list of journalists that may be sympathetic to your research.

Your media database will be constantly evolving as new journalists are identified and one's who have moved on are dropped. Some of these contacts will be journalists covering a specific beat that overlaps with your territory; some will be journalists in related fields, such as business and finance for a researcher in economics; and some will be the columnists and commentators who pontificate on all sorts of topics and whose articles may occasionally benefit from a dash of real research. But whoever they are, it is important that before making contact you have read some of their work and – most important – have got their names, positions and addresses right.

At the core of the database will be a handful of journalists whose interests align very closely with yours. Many of the specialists working on the quality press are acknowledged experts in their field including people such as the *Financial Times's* Nick Timmins on social policy, the *Independent's* Jeremy Laurance on health and *The Times's* Anatole Kaletsky on economics. These are the kind of people it is worth investing some time and effort in order to try and build a relationship with.

Through occasional meetings and regular reading of their articles, you can learn to understand their needs and interests, get an insight into their world, provide advice when asked and, from time-to-time, offer exclusives. This is not necessarily as difficult as it sounds. Conferences and seminars are good meeting places. It is always worth your while approaching a journalist directly, to tell them about your current research and suggesting a further conversation. Another useful device, in advance of an academic conference for example, is for you to email a summary of the research you are presenting to selected journalists, followed up with a phone call. That in itself might not end up as a newspaper article, but at least a conversation has begun.

All this effort can pay-off in terms of either subsequent media mentions of you or your research or getting your perspective into the news coverage of your subject area. In this context, it is worth noting that while there may be a perception that some journalists may be lazy they are also, generally, sharp and you should treat them with the same respect as other professional colleagues. They can identify the flaw in an argument very quickly, and rarely fail to grasp the implications of a piece of research if it is properly explained. As one academic has observed of his experiences with journalists: '...among the quality dailies, they are mostly cleverer than my colleagues. They might not have brilliant degrees or PhDs, but they have good sense and quickness of mind.'

So what makes a good news story?

News is not an exact science! A story that might be newsworthy one day and fill the papers may not have got a mention had it appeared the day before or the day after. It all depends on national and international events as well as the scandal of the moment.

One role of the media is to entertain. Scandal and controversy are virtually guaranteed column inches. Not much use if you are trying to get interest in a 'serious research story'. However, when presenting a story to the media remember that in general the bigger the human interest angle, the bigger the news is likely to be. We are fascinated by things that may impact on us, whether it is now, in the future or in the past. By giving practical examples and applying your research to 'everyday life' you could breathe life into a story that may otherwise be a bit dry.

Although you can't predict what will be on the news agenda on any given day, there are ways of increasing the chances of your research being reported on. There are certain ingredients that every journalist is looking for:

- 1 First what is the 'hook'? What makes your research newsworthy? Is it a tie into the current news agenda, the publication of a paper in a peer reviewed journal or are you presenting at an international conference. Being awarded funding can also be a hook, but in general the media prefer to know about real outcomes rather than hypothesised ones. So a finished project is likely to get more coverage than a new one.
- 2 A meaningful soundbite explaining the significance of the research and what the findings mean in day to day terms. Don't forget to illustrate it with easy to relate to examples.
- 3 Include some digestible facts and figures. Most people are not interested in knowing the detailed methodology but they do like to understand the basics – so a simple, jargon free explanation of how your findings came about alongside some facts and figures.

Newspaper articles are constructed very differently to other types of literature. Because of the fast-changing nature of news, an editor never knows how much space they will have in the paper for any given article, and while they plan a rough layout, if a big story breaks other news will get cut. This can result in a 500 word article about your research being relegated to a 50-word news in brief article.

“ When the call comes in the middle of the night, a fireman only has to put on his pants and extinguish the flames. A correspondent must tell a million people who struck the match and why. ”

MORT ROSENBLUM, ASSOCIATED PRESS



How to write a press release

At the heart of any media strategy should be a steady stream of press releases sent to the database of journalists as well as to the newsdesks of the major media and online news organisations. These should summarise, in a punchy and accessible form, the findings of your research whether published in books, working papers, scholarly journals, special reports prepared for a wider audience or about to be presented at academic conferences or public events.

A well written press release can sometimes be the easiest way to attract media attention to your particular story. It is worth bearing in mind that journalists receive a huge volume of press releases on a daily basis so yours will need to stand out from the crowd.

Before you write your press release it is worth thinking about *why* you are writing it. What exactly is the story you are trying to publicise? It is always easier if you have something newsworthy to say, such as the release of new research findings, but you could always tie a release to an event that you are organising. Try not to simply keep rehashing or restating things that you have said before.

A press release should be written so as to make the research accessible to a wider public, setting out what it demonstrates and its wider implications. It should not be the abstract of a scholarly paper.

The release must convince the media that something novel and interesting is being said. Findings that suggest a new social trend, provide an alternative explanation about a current issue or offer a new way of looking at an issue, in other words that have 'newness' or 'nowness', are much more likely to be picked up than those that don't. The key question to ask of any findings that are to be released to the media is the one journalists instinctively ask of themselves – 'so what?'

The press release should be concrete and specific in what it says. For example rather than saying, 'The research suggests that if taxes go up, the divorce rate goes down' it is better to say, 'Raising the tax rate to 50 per cent would reduce the rate of divorce by half.'

The release should be structured from 'top to bottom'. It should start with the most important and interesting points, gradually working down to background context etc. When journalists are writing they never quite know if their finished article might undergo quite severe editing if, for example, a big event happens that puts pressure on space. To cater for such editing, journalists need to make sure that regardless of whether their article is one paragraph or 20 paragraphs, it still makes sense. When you are writing a press release the same principles should apply as you as you don't know whether the reader will have time to read to the end.

To ensure everything is included in the first paragraph, virtually all news articles answer the five Ws in the first few sentences – Who, What, When, Where, Why.

Who has done something?

What have they done?

When did they do it?

Where did they do it?

Why is it important?

Whatever the subject matter, a press release should be written in plain English. For a non-specialist audience there is no point in writing in highly technical terms. If a journalist can not understand what they are reading they are unlikely to pursue a story. Not using technical jargon isn't 'dumbing down'; it is just ensuring that your work is communicated in a way that can be understood by a wider audience.

Sometimes there might be no escaping using more technical terms. If you really do need to use them then make sure that you clearly explain what you mean from the outset.

The press release should consist of more than a list of assumptions made and conclusions reached. Rather, it should explain the purpose of the research, the framework within which it was carried out, the results and the implications for policy. It should be written in clear and concise English.

Use should be made of case studies. Direct quotations should also be used whether from you to highlight a particular aspect of the research, from one of the 'researched' to illustrate the research or from an eminent person to praise the research.

In terms of length, the press release should not exceed 600 words. At the end, should be a 'Notes to Editors' which can include the details of publication, the funders, the methodology etc. The press release must contain full contact details of the researcher including mobile phone and email. It can also be useful, with agreement, to include another contact such as your funder or university press office.

Make sure that any additional material a journalist might request is easily accessible via a website or at least can be sent via email, perhaps as an Adobe PDF. Increasingly, once research appears in a newspaper, readers will want to download the full paper, so accessibility is important for them too.

Issuing press releases

When you distribute your press release it is important to make sure you target it to the people that are actually going to be interested in it. There is no point in just sending it to a News Editor who may be inundated with press releases when the person who is most likely to write about it is the Social Affairs Correspondent. Use the media database that you have put together to send your press release to the specialist correspondents plus the news editors of all target media. It is also important to distinguish between online editions and the newspapers or broadcast outlets themselves. They are not all one and the same – so journalists at BBC Online, for example, should be circulated in addition to those in their ‘parent’ organisation.

If you distribute the press release via email do make sure that you pay attention to the wording you use in the subject line. What you put may influence whether the message is deleted without even being opened. Depending on the email system used, only the first couple of paragraphs may be visible so they must give the journalist the story and make him or her want to open up the email. If the release is being emailed to a number of contacts it should be blind copied so as not to give away personal details.

Timing of your release will also be key. For example, stories about exam results are very popular in August when the A-Level and GCSE results are published but at other times of the year it may be more difficult to get publicity. If you can tie your particular story into the current news agenda then it will help to generate interest in it.

You should also think about the audience that you are trying to target. Is it a very technical subject and mainly of appeal to a specialist audience? Or could the interest in it be more mainstream and likely to appeal to the national media? Perhaps it is something that would only be of interest to people in your own locality so your regional media might be the best place to start.

It is a good idea to provide some sort of real, or apparent, ‘peg’ for the release, for example ‘at a conference happening today, Professor X will say...’ or ‘a report published this week reveals that...’ The press release should have an embargo at the top of the release. This is the time convenient to you when you would like the story to be reported on. An embargo also gives journalists time to do further research on the story in the knowledge that no competitors will publish before them.

The commonest form of embargo is one worded ‘Embargoed until 00:01 hours on...’ In other words it is available for the morning newspapers on the day just beginning plus the online sites, radio and TV programmes. Beware an embargo ‘00.00’ it is ambiguous and leads to confusion. An alternative embargo can be for when an event is actually taking place – for example, if a keynote speech is being

given at 11.00 then that would be an appropriate time for it to be embargoed, especially if it were being covered by the broadcast media.

Once a release has been sent out it is important for journalists to be able to reach you. Journalists now work 24/7 hence a university switchboard is not a particularly helpful point of contact. A mobile telephone number and an email address address where you can be contacted are now essential.

Responding to demand

Much media work is 'supply driven', attempting to 'sell' findings to potentially interested journalists. But it is also important to focus on the demand side. What are the news stories of the day and what stories are likely to emerge over the next few weeks and months?

That means keeping on top of what's happening in related areas, whether it is the latest economic and social statistics, government policy initiatives, business and market news, foreign affairs or summit meetings of the European Union, the G8 or other leading global institutions. The proliferation of online news and government and business information makes this a relatively easy task these days.

In following the news, you should always be asking yourself if there are past research findings that can be used to inform current public debates. These could be simply 'reheated' and issued as press releases, or repackaged into new reports. Indeed, for bigger research centres or programmes seeking a wider public profile, it is a good idea to develop a regular series of publications for an audience beyond academia, repackaging research in a non-technical way, particularly addressing topical issues and perhaps timed to coincide with key political events, as does the Centre for Economic Performance with its publication *Centrepiece*, the Centre for Market and Public Organisation with *Choice* and the Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation does with its *Newsletter*. Publications like these combine demand and supply: some articles present new research and demonstrate its significance, while others take a matter of national debate and point to the perspective and evidence from social science.

Individual researchers too can raise their public profile by engaging with current events and demonstrating how social science research offers insights and potential solutions. For example, you might start writing letters to newspapers or rethink your home page so that relevant material is easily accessible for journalists. Or you might draft non-technical pieces relating research results to public policy questions, which can be posted on your site and perhaps subsequently, appear as feature articles in the press. Journalists are always looking for knowledgeable people to comment on current events, and your expertise and your independence are very real assets.

“ Journalism largely consists of saying
'Lord Jones is Dead' to people who never
knew Lord Jones was alive. ”

G. K. CHESTERTON, AUTHOR



All this effort can and does bring results in the form of stories beginning to appear and the calls from journalists becoming more and more frequent. The first important thing is to recognise that dealing with the media takes up time. The media feeds on itself in many ways, so once your name is out there, you will be more and more in demand. Interest is likely to come in waves: long pauses when you are ignored followed by short periods when you are bombarded with telephone calls and requests for interviews.

Assuming you're happy with that, you need to build and maintain your reputation as a reliable resource, always available to talk and not taking offence when journalists get it wrong, as they sometimes will. This means treating them with respect, always returning a call, never being resentful for the intrusion and, in circumstances where it really is impossible for you to talk or to make a broadcast appearance, finding a colleague who can.

Print journalists typically place fewer time demands on researchers' time than broadcast journalists as they tend to have clear deadlines, which fall within regular working hours. And for the most part, they're happy to do the work themselves and will only need ten minutes or so of your time to get your angle on a topic. TV and radio can be very different.

So the phone rings and it is a journalist. Here are a few key points that are worth bearing in mind:

- When you receive a call make sure you know who you are talking to. That means simply asking name, contact number and the media organisation the caller is representing. Be wary of journalists who simply describe themselves as a 'freelancer'. Most freelancers will be working on assignment for a particular outlet, and this might well influence how you deal with the query. If they say they haven't yet found an outlet then gently suggest they call you back when they have. Many freelancers are 'stringers' – this means they are paid a retainer by a media organisation and, for your purposes, should be regarded as members of staff.
- Find out as much as you can about the journalist's query – what are they looking for, what's the angle, who else have they spoken with and so on – also ask them about their deadline. Then tell them that you cannot speak to them immediately but will call back within ten minutes or so.
- Collect your thoughts. First decide if this is a subject area that you want to/feel qualified to speak about, perhaps a colleague might be more appropriate? Seek advice from colleagues and your press office. Go to an online news site. Is there something in the news you should know about? Then, assuming you are going ahead, decide what you want to say, and just as importantly, what you don't want to say.

- When talking about your own research, follow the same principles as for a press release: convey the key findings first in an accessible way. Particularly for live interviews, decide in advance on the two or three key points you want to make and try to get them across in your first answer.
- Be prepared for the difficult questions. Try to think through in advance what you might be asked and plan good answers.
- When invited to discuss a news item, you must be willing to talk at short notice on any relevant issue. Not being prepared to do an early-morning interview will probably end your media career before it begins.

If you are talking specifically about your research remember to explain why it was thought important for the research to be undertaken in the first place and the public benefits likely to accrue from your work. You might find it helpful to email the journalist a summary of your research that you have pre-prepared, this can avoid misunderstanding and might well save you time.

TV and radio

Research from the BBC and Ofcom consistently demonstrates that, despite the growing importance of the internet, television is still regarded, overwhelmingly, as the most used and most trusted source of news and information. In crude number terms, it's worth pointing out that the audience for BBC TV's *Breakfast News* contains more viewers from social classes A and B than in the circulations of the *Financial Times*, *The Times* and the *Independent* combined and Radio Four's *Analysis* programme's audience of 800,000 is higher than the circulation of any broadsheet newspaper.

But there's another important argument as to why social scientists should engage with broadcast media and that is because today, television is where the national debate is heard by more people than in any other location.

Social science research lends itself well to dissemination by radio and television. Social scientists are engaged with people, specifically, with people in social settings, the very stuff of factual television and radio.

There are a variety of ways in which social science researchers can involve themselves with television and radio; these are broadly divisible into proactive and reactive strategies. The former occur when the researcher seeks to interest a broadcaster in an idea for an item, programme or series. The latter involves the academic being invited to contribute to a programme as an expert commentator. The proactive mode, in which the researcher has the opportunity of setting the programme's agenda, is the most useful but also the most difficult to negotiate,

in that it involves trying to drive the broadcasters onto the social scientist's terrain. It is easier for the researcher to come to be seen as a reliable radio or television 'talking head'.

In order to raise your profile with journalists and producers there are various strategies you can pursue. One starting point is getting on to the databanks of the various news organisations. This requires getting known as someone who can deliver an original perspective, be relied upon to be available and speaks in accessible language.

There are no 'golden rules' for getting yourself into such a position. The most effective route is the Catch 22 one of being someone who has been heard or seen making such a contribution before. However, starting from scratch, there are a number of strategies that can be adopted in order to capture the attention of broadcasters. These include:

- sending out occasional press releases about research findings
- writing for broadsheet newspapers or for the specialist weekly or monthly press
- speaking at meetings, seminars etc where journalists are likely to be present
- phoning or emailing newsdesks or specialist correspondents to offer 'expert' comment on a breaking news story
- being recommended by a colleague, a professional association, research funder or university press office
- participating in a phone-in or studio discussion programme
- as a result of an entry in a university list of 'experts'.

TV and radio news

News and current affairs tend to be the areas of programming that make the greatest use of social science researchers as expert contributors. National television and radio news bulletins are among the factual programmes that have the greatest audience penetration—regularly reaching audiences of 5 to 6 million viewers a night.

News bulletins and rolling news channels have to fill a great deal of airtime, mostly at short notice. In order to ensure that this happens in as efficient a manner as possible, news organisations have adapted particular routines to ensure that the flow of news and feature material is sufficient to more than fill their slots. These programmes therefore have a great appetite for ‘expert comment’ and, paradoxically, they are on the constant lookout for reliable contributors and ‘new voices and faces’.

There are some pitfalls to be aware of when offering a perspective on a breaking news story, including being drawn into political controversy, not being fully up to date with the story and compromising research partners and funders. However, a little time spent in preparation before the interview, plus a quick word with a more experienced colleague or a friendly press officer should ensure a successful and effective engagement in the national debate, plus a good chance of being invited back onto that programme or others.

In giving a comment on a breaking story you will probably be part of a ‘package’, one recorded voice amongst others. For national news, the interview might last for five minutes but only one 20-second answer might be used. However, on current affairs programmes and the 24-hour radio and television news channels, all of which make much greater use of experts, you could well be live and hence can expect to appear for much longer. Although the 24-hour news channels have smaller audiences they do provide an entry point to other outlets. Most newsrooms keep a constant eye on both BBC News 24 and Sky News. It is not uncommon for them either to contact an expert seen on the news channels, or quote directly what they have said on-air. The BBC’s *World Service* is also an important outlet for serious speech-based material.

One of the commonest ways of breaking into national news or current affairs is via local radio and television stations. Local BBC radio stations, outside London, have high speech content and an imperative to feature local stories.

One effective way of gaining experience, and getting known, is for you to contact local radio and television stations and offer to provide a local perspective on a major national or regional story. This perspective has two benefits. First, local

broadcasters favour experts from their local university – it costs them little and gives a national story a local ‘spin’. Second, you may well be able to find a local angle for a national story.

For local BBC news you can expect virtually the whole of the interview to be broadcast in breakfast, lunch or ‘drive-time’ local news programmes. In addition shorter ‘cuts’, around 30 seconds, will be used in the news bulletins throughout the day. Independent radio stations follow the same pattern but tend to run both the interviews and the ‘cuts’ at shorter length.

It’s worth bearing in mind that local radio stations are also often supplied with news and current affairs items by some central point within their organisation. For example, BBC local radio stations depend on the BBC’s London-based General News Service, which supplies a constant flow of national and international news and current affairs items, sometimes tailored to specific station’s needs. It is not uncommon for an interviewee to find him or herself in a studio in Broadcasting House in London, undertaking a series of interviews on the same subject, switching from local station to local station, sometimes with bewildering rapidity. Independent Radio News and Sky News provide national and international stories and bulletins for commercial radio stations.

Current affairs programmes

As useful as it is to appear within a news package as the ‘expert’ voice, there can be more value in securing a live or ‘as-live’ studio interview, and that means being invited on to programmes such as BBC TV’s *Newsnight* or *Channel Four News* or their daily radio equivalents, *Today*, *The World at One*, *PM* or *The World Tonight*. This latter programme, in particular, makes use of large numbers of ‘experts’ and tends to allow them relatively generous amounts of airtime.

However, it is worth bearing in mind that these programmes like to use commentators whom they know and trust ‘to deliver’ and who are therefore, to some extent, the ‘usual suspects’. However, they also like to develop their own particular coterie of experts as a way of enhancing their particular programme’s unique identity, hence are always on the look-out for new voices and faces.

Local current affairs programmes, on both radio and television, vary enormously. The best advice, and this applies to all contacts with the media, is to know the product. In other words it can repay dividends to familiarise yourself with the output of your local radio or television programmes. If you are able to offer these outlets something which more or less meets their style of presentation and content the chances of success will be that much greater.

Feature programmes and documentaries

There is a huge range of factual programming on television and radio that have an interest in making use of the expertise of social sciences researchers. These programmes are usually specialist in subject matter and targeted in terms of audience. Perhaps the two biggest 'consumers' of social science expertise are the daily radio programmes on Radio Four – '*You and Yours*' and '*Women's Hour*'. The former has a very specific 'consumer' brief but interprets this far wider than simply looking at goods and services. Social policy researchers looking at issues such as disability, elder people or family issues are frequent guests on the programme. '*Women's Hour*' also covers much of this terrain but also ranges more widely in general current affairs issues with a women's slant.

The full range of radio and television programmes that would be covered by the general title of 'feature programmes' is ever changing. The main television channels are currently less interested in the specialist factual area. *BBC Vision* lists its current specialist factual output as *Horizon*, *Natural World*, *The Money Programme* and *Timewatch*. BBC radio is a much richer stream to mine in this area. Not only do they transmit a much wider range of programmes, but these programmes – for the obvious reason of lack of visual content, are almost entirely dependent on 'talking heads'. They are also, generally, more open to ideas for programmes or items from outsiders

Most academics are familiar with the phone call from an eager young television researcher asking if they could spare a few minutes to talk about their research. It's a dilemma. On the one hand we all like talking about our research, on the other hand time is a very finite resource, particularly given that many of these conversations tend to have no end result.

Some of these conversations might be because a programme, already in production, wants to speak to you about your research, as a preliminary to you being interviewed for the programme. But many more are general 'fishing expeditions' for programmes that might or might not ever be made.

“ Journalism is a profession whose business it is to explain to others what it personally does not understand. ”

LORD NORTHCLIFFE, NEWSPAPER PROPRIETOR



If the conversation is about a potential appearance on a programme already in production then find out as much as possible about it and the specific contribution you are being asked to make; then you can make a simple decision as to whether or not to participate. There can be no fixed rules about how to deal with these situations because, at one extreme, it could be that your research interests are so central to the programme's focus that it could well form the centre-piece of the programme. At the other extreme you might spend a considerable amount of time talking to the TV or radio researcher, provide them with a good deal of detailed information, be interviewed at length and then be disappointed and frustrated to find, on transmission, that your contribution has ended up on the proverbial cutting-room floor.

However, if the initial phone call is of the 'fishing' variety, the situation is more complex. One useful technique to adopt is to have available an up to date, but brief, account of your current research. When the call or email arrives from the researcher asking for a 'general chat' as opposed to specific information, you might suggest that, as a starting point, you send the researcher the summary. Having looked at your summary the programme researcher can then decide if there is anything to be gained by making contact with you again. This is an effective filter, most researchers don't call back and those that do will be doing so because they believe that your area of research is germane to their programme.

The best general guidance when talking with television and radio researchers is:

- establish how close the programme's agenda is to your own. What are you going to gain by taking part?
- if there's a gap then either can you align the programme's interest closer to your own, and if not, is there a colleague you could recommend as an alternative source?
- if it does fall within your own area of interest then email a brief summary of your research
- if there is a follow-up call you should indicate how much time you have available to talk
- if the call takes longer, offer one of three choices – ending the conversation there and then, offering to give an interview on tape, or offering to act as a paid consultant to the programme
- always be polite – remember today's enthusiastic researcher is tomorrow's editor of *Panorama*.

Most academics would prefer broadcasters simply to choose to feature their work as the centrepiece of the programme or series. This is a desirable, and not impossible goal, but you need to be aware that the commissioning process for radio and television programmes can be every bit as convoluted as that which exists for the commissioning of academic research.

There are three possible routes to securing the commission of a programme or series. The most straightforward way is to interest a broadcaster in adopting a programme or series idea as an in-house production, based on your research. Secondly, intermediaries, such as an independent production company, might be persuaded that your research could form the basis of a programme, or series, which could be offered to one of the broadcasters. Or thirdly you can make a direct approach to a broadcast commissioning editor, seeking to persuade him or her of the viability of the research as a basis for a programme proposal. In most circumstances, the commissioning editor will direct you towards a production company that already has a track record in the relevant subject area.

There are three ways of making contact with relevant independent production companies. The first method, by word-of-mouth, is always the best. Second, if you see or hear a programme that is in your area, phone the broadcaster and ask their information office for the contact details of the producers. The third way is through the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT) which is the industry's trade organisation. The PACT website (www.pact.co.uk) contains the PACT Directory of companies cross referenced by regional, specialisms and commissions.

Appearing on TV or Radio

An important part of the communications strategy of any organisation is to build the capacity to handle the media across a broad range of staff. This is particularly important for a research organisation, where the people the media really want to talk to are the researchers. So while a press officer can provide a valuable focal point for media relations, it is worth developing your own media skills that will enable you to effectively communicate your research results on paper, in conversation with journalists and other non-specialists, and in broadcast interviews, whether live or recorded.

The key skill to be developed in a team of researchers is the ability to communicate with all sorts of groups, not just academic peers. It is a highly valuable skill to be able to give the one-minute version of your research findings, for TV or radio, and the ten-minute version, for public presentations and for conversations with journalists, as well as the standard 50-minute version of the academic lecture. The ESRC offers its researchers a comprehensive programme of media training and many universities also provide similar opportunities.

In addition to formal training you can also try to teach yourself via 'on-the-job' training. The proliferation of broadcast and on-line media in recent years provides numerous opportunities for researchers wishing to develop their writing and media presentation skills. Writing for a local newspaper or an obscure online magazine, for example, will give you your first publication outside the academic world, and a chance to see if you have a taste for writing for a non-specialist audience. Similarly, an interview on a local radio station or a TV programme broadcast on the web to half a dozen enthusiasts will provide practice in becoming a successful 'talking head'.

Below are some general tips and guidelines that are worth bearing in mind, prior to undertaking radio and television interviews.

Television interviews

Remember that TV and radio are powerful communications vehicles. You are talking to people in their living rooms, sitting rooms, kitchens so to be effective you need to grab their attention. You should know why you are there, the reason that you have decided to do the interview as well as the message or messages you are trying to get across.

It's worth remembering that we see people before we hear them so your appearance is crucial. Don't allow your clothes to distract. Television cannot cope with busy patterns, checks, bright colours, or large amounts of blacks or whites. Don't distract the viewer with badges and other accoutrements nor the listener with heavy clanking jewellery.

Always check the context of your interview. How long will it be? What other items will form part of the package and so on. Remember that once you are in the studio, or in front of the camera, you are performing. Never let the camera catch you unawares. Assume that a shot will be cut to you before the interviewer starts to introduce you, also take your cue to leave the interview set from the interviewer.

Language is crucial. Try to avoid jargon however, don't confuse using simple language to explain your research with 'dumbing down' your work. You can still get across the complexity and importance of your work without using jargon. Sometimes it is inevitable that there will be technical terms you need to use; this is fine so long as you explain clearly what the term means at the outset.

Try and make your work as visual as possible. Use analogies and metaphors to help explain complex processes and liken things to everyday situations. Try to ensure that people can identify with what you are saying. Use statistics sparingly and if you do use them it can be useful to confirm what you have said via email to avoid mistakes.

The two most important questions in any interview are the first and the last. You can find out the first by asking, the last is usually signalled by use of 'finally' or 'briefly' or some similar form of closure.

Always prepare for any interview, no matter how thoroughly you think you know the subject. It is imperative not to enter into an interview without having given it careful thought and consideration. Make sure that you have seen that day's news by looking at an online news website. The interview might be about your research but that day's news agenda might just suggest a particular line of questioning to the interviewer.

Prepare your key messages carefully. What do you want to get across in the interview? Then try and use every question as a means of getting to where you want to get to, not where the interviewer wants to get to.

“ To hear people talk about the facts you would think that they lay about like pieces of gold ore in the Yukon waiting to be picked up. All stories are written backwards. They are supposed to begin with the facts and develop from there, but in reality they begin with a journalist’s point of view, a conception, and it is that point of view from which the facts are subsequently organised. ”

CLAUD COCKBURN, JOURNALIST



Dos and don'ts of television interviews

- Do arrive at the studio or location in more than good time. Nothing is likely to prejudice your own performance than being late.
- Do watch the programme that you are likely to be appearing on beforehand to get some idea of the style and pace.
- Do record, watch and discuss your appearances afterwards. We all learn from practice.
- Do pay attention to the floor manager who is your link with the production side. He or she will be telling you, and more importantly the interviewer, precisely what is taking place.
- Do ask for a glass of water, as both a means of refreshing yourself and as a prop in emergencies.
- Do accept offers of make-up; not only will it help your appearance but the five minutes in the make-up room are a useful time for you to recap and revise what you are going to say.
- Do feel free to ask your interviewer to cover specific points, although he or she is under no obligation to do so.
- Don't be overfriendly with your interviewer. He or she is the viewers' friend, not yours.
- Conversely, don't get into an argument with the interviewer. He or she will always appear to have won.
- Don't take notes into the TV studio with you. They will distract you and the rustle of paper will distract the viewer.
- Don't drink alcohol before giving an interview. You will often be offered hospitality, but television studios are hot, and people who have taken in alcohol even in tiny doses sweat and slur their words.
- Don't assume the viewer or for that matter the interviewer knows a great deal about your subject; always explain and give background information that will be helpful.
- Don't give monosyllabic answers; on the other hand do not ramble on at great length.

Additional points for radio

If the reporter visits you:

- Find somewhere quiet. A small room, or inside a car is good.
- The microphone will be very close to your face, do try to ignore it instead concentrate on the reporter's face and the questions.
- If you are not happy with the interview and it's not live then do ask to do it again.

If you do the interview via telephone

- If they want to record it immediately and you do not feel prepared, say that you will phone back in ten minutes.
- Use that time to make notes around the key points that you want to make. Don't write a script as you will sound wooden.
- Again, if you don't like it, ask to do it again.

If it is a studio interview

- Find out who else will be there. It may be that they have also invited some one else who has a different point of view so you may need to be prepared to defend your view.
- During the interview, concentrate on the interviewer even if you can't see them.
- Take notes on a small card if it helps but don't rustle them. Also make sure that you do not thump the table or wear jewellery that may clink.
- Cutting in is unattractive, but if you decide it's necessary do it decisively, or don't do it at all.

If you take part in a phone-in

- Try not to let questions from listeners irritate you. Always be polite.
- Note down the name of callers as they begin so that you can refer to them in your response, but only use them once.

Some general pitfalls to avoid when being interviewed by any journalist

- **Having words put in your mouth.** If a journalist says: 'Don't you think that this is the worst thing that could have happened?' and you agree, it will sound as though you actually said it yourself, and any subsequent reporting of the interview will put those words firmly in your mouth.
- **Questions with built-in assumptions.** If a question has a built-in premise with which you do not agree then you must rebut it. For example, if the interviewer says: 'So you threw caution to the wind and went ahead with this exciting new project?' you should make it plain that you started the project only after careful consideration.
- **Repeating negatives.** In broadcast interviews, if you do not agree with a negative statement, you should try not to repeat it. The journalist says: 'So, these half yearly figures are pretty disastrous.' Do not say: 'I don't think they're pretty disastrous, in fact they're just what we expected after we restructured the company'. This just reinforces the notion of the figures being 'pretty disastrous'. A simple 'no' and the rest of the answer has much more impact.
- **Keep in short and simple.** Do not talk for too long. Nerves often make people 'gabble', thereby opening them up to questions for which they are not prepared.
- **It's not personal.** Try to avoid feeling that the journalist is attacking you personally if they ask particularly difficult questions and put you 'under the spotlight'. They are only doing their jobs. On no account show your anger. Being the voice of reason helps you stay in control of the interview situation.

Whether or not to complain

Once the media are taking an interest, you will have overcome the frustration of your research being ignored. But you will inevitably face two further frustrations. One is that in a certain number of cases, material you have provided or interviews you have given will not be used because other new stories have taken precedence. The other is that something written about your research contains errors, or oversimplifies or even distorts your findings.

With the former, it is never worth complaining: you simply have to recognise the nature of the news process. With the latter, it is rarely worth complaining, though if you are seriously misrepresented, a careful factual correction or a quiet word with the erring journalist may be appropriate. In neither case will an emotional reaction be at all helpful to your future media career.

The next step up is a call to the editor. He, she or the deputy might well suggest a 'letter to the editor' as a means of redress. This should not be disregarded, letters pages are among the most read sections of a newspaper and is a good space to get yourself and your research better known. Finally, there is the formal

mechanism of the Press Complaints Commission or in the case of a broadcast Ofcom or the BBC Trust. These procedures can take up significant amounts of your time, although they do tend to start the process with attempted mediation and this might well result in a satisfactory outcome. However, whichever course you follow do take advice. These are choppy waters and a seasoned professional can provide sound advice.

Assessing your impact

To begin assessing the impact of your media strategy, it is essential to track coverage of the research that has been promoted. For print publications, this can be done relatively easily, through the online electronic databases such as *LexisNexis*. However, they are far from comprehensive and it might be worth using a professional cuttings service such as Cision or Durrants. They can be commissioned to search for particular key words over a limited period of time which will ensure that you are able to track all printed coverage of a particular event or publication. These companies can be expensive so do check whether the ESRC or your university press office can help. Additionally, for no cost you can set up alerts with outlets such as Google News to monitor for particular key words.

Beyond simply keeping track of coverage, you'll begin to feel the impact of your efforts through further requests for advice or interviews from the media. The number of hits on your website will also increase as journalists and other interested parties follow up mentions of your research in a newspaper. Once you have begun to get a name for yourself as someone willing to step outside of academic life and contribute insights to the national debate, the attention you receive will soar.

Further down the road as your media profile grows, there may be offers of consultancy work from the private or public sector, requests for you to speak at non-academic conferences, even invitations to advise ministers. You will have a far greater opportunity to influence policy and public opinion and to promote the brand of your university and the public image of your discipline.

Further help and advice

If you would like further help and advice on working with the media please contact the ESRC Press Office: Tel: 01793 413032 / 413122 / 413119
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An abstract graphic consisting of several thick, flowing, overlapping ribbons in various colors (blue, green, yellow, orange, red, purple) that curve and swirl across the page, set against a black background.

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