

Communicating Science to the Media and the Public

Presented to: Meet the Editors, San Carlos, Brazil

Presented on: November 2016

Presented by: Philip Greenland, MD; Senior Editor, JAMA

Science and the Media



Edited by Donald Kennedy
and Geneva Overholser

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES

AAAS - 2010

Available for Free online

Current Website 2016

<http://www.aaas.org/pes>

<http://www.aaas.org/page/media-interviews>

ENHANCING EDUCATION

GLOBAL OUTREACH

POLICY & ADVOCACY

PRESS & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

SUPPORTING CAREERS

Member Login



NEWS

JOURNALS

MEMBERS

CAREERS

PROGRAMS

GIVING

EVENTS

ABOUT

SEARCH



Center for Public Engagement with Science & Technology

Providing scientists and scientific institutions with the resources they need
to have meaningful conversations with the public.

PROGRAMS

NEWS & EVENTS

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

CONTACT US

Background

- Illiteracy about science among the general public
- Coverage of science by the media is a central factor in scientific illiteracy.
 - Journalists value timeliness, speed, simplicity, and clarity.
 - Yet -- stories about science and technology may be long-building, complex, and without dramatic, time-pegged events.
 - Writers need to grab and hold attention, to write tight stories or produce short segments
 - These can come at the cost of context and nuance

Background

- Journalistic tradition of “objectivity” is often distorted into a **false balance**.
 - Giving **equal weight to opposing views**, no matter how much or little credibility or value they possess.
 - These conventions make it difficult to disentangle the underlying science from the controversy
 - **Sometimes creating the notion that scientific thinking is divided even when it is not.**

Background

- Many in the scientific community are reluctant to speak to the press or to engage with the public.
 - One bad experience with an interviewer may turn a scientist off to journalists for a lifetime.
- “Popularization” of one’s work in mainstream media is often viewed with disdain by colleagues.
- Lack of training opportunities for scientists and engineers to acquire the skills to make them strong communicators.

Media Interviews

- Plan ahead and prepare remarks and anticipate likely questions to boost your confidence before an interview.

Media Interviews: Scheduling an interview

- **Some reporters will call in advance to schedule an interview.** Others want answers right away.
 - Because of the news media's time-sensitive nature, reporters are often on very short deadlines and may not have the luxury of scheduling interviews very far in advance.

Media Interviews: Scheduling an interview

- **If a reporter requests information in a hurry, ask for some time to collect your thoughts.**
 - Ask for their deadline and arrange for a mutually-agreeable time to talk, even if it's in five minutes.
 - Taking the time to think through your response will help the interview go smoothly for both parties.

Media Interviews: Print stories

- Try to find out as much as possible about the story in advance.
- Ask the reporter:
 - What is the story about?
 - What is the deadline?
 - What level of detail are you seeking?
 - In which outlet(s) will the story appear?
 - Who is the intended audience?

Media Interviews: Preparing for an interview

- Define goals. “What is the key point I want to get across in this interview?”
- Consider the intended audience – the reporter’s readers, listeners, or viewers. What are their values, interests, and concerns? Prepare your core messages with the intended audience in mind.

Media Interviews: Preparing for an interview

- Compose core messages. Develop a pointed message focused on different aspects of that key point. Gather facts, figures, and anecdotes to support your points.
- Practice delivering core messages. Aim to deliver messages without relying on notes, but avoid stiffly reciting memorized messages. Be natural.

Media Interviews: Preparing for an interview

- Anticipate questions: Think about what questions the reporter might ask, especially tough ones, and have responses ready. Practice bridging to your core messages when answering their questions, and answering difficult questions as briefly as possible.

Media Interviews: Preparing for an interview

- Prepare summaries. Reporters always need perspective (e.g., How many people are affected? When did the issue arise? Is this part of a national trend?).
 - Provide the reporter with a written summary of information, main points or statistics, or other papers for background information, if possible.
 - Consider putting the issue into perspective.

Media Interviews: Preparing for an interview

- Get feedback in advance.
 - Public information officers at most institutions or agencies can help refine core messages and provide feedback.
 - Also, practice your core messages with friends or colleagues with different expertise for some honest feedback.

Media Interviews: During an interview

- Talk in lay terms, using as little professional or technical language (jargon) as possible.
- State the most important information first — then provide the background. Mention the subject of your research by name several times during the interview, rather than saying "it" or "they."
- Give examples. Illustrate key points with stories, anecdotes, and examples.

Media Interviews: During an interview

- Use sound bites. For taped interviews, radio and television editors often cut interviewees' remarks down to several seconds. Likewise, print and web reporters often use only a couple of one- or two-sentence quotes in stories.
 - Prepare “sound bites,” or concise statements, that writers or TV and radio editors can easily insert into a story.
 - Be sure to use any pre-prepared 3-point messages in sound bites to ensure core messages get across.

Media Interviews: During an interview

- **Stay on message.** Stick to core messages and do not get drawn off on tangents.
- **Repeat core messages** if necessary to get back on track.
- Never say anything that you don't want to appear in print, be heard on the radio, or seen on television or the internet.

Media Interviews: During an interview

- Work with the reporter. Make eye contact if the interview is in-person.
- Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of the subject. If a reporter bases questions on incorrect information, set the record straight.
- Offer background information where necessary.
- Avoid saying things "off the record." Reporters may or may not honor this, and it may be frustrating to them.

Media Interviews: During an interview

- Identify opinion vs. fact: Identify your thoughts as either fact or opinion. Your opinions are your own, but fact is fact.

Media Interviews: During an interview

- Be honest. Don't try to conceal negative information; rather, let your interviewer know what you are doing to resolve a problem. Where uncertainty exists, note that it is an inherent component of the scientific process.
- Don't joke. Be friendly, but not complacent. Assume everything said, even in a social situation, may appear in print or on the air.
- Summarize. Make final comments clear and concise, reemphasizing core messages. If it seems the message did not get across, force it in at the end. ("I think we've missed the real, critical issue here, which is...")
- Be confident.

Media Interviews: After an Interview

- Don't get discouraged. Don't be alarmed if most of the interview doesn't make it into a story – reporters often conduct many extensive interviews to gather the information they need to get to the heart of a story. They might only include one or two quotes from a half-hour interview.

Media Interviews: After an Interview

- Report mistakes. All good reporters want to be accurate. If the reporter has made a mistake in the printed story, write and tell them so. Most reporters will be appreciative. However, if something is simply written in the reporter's style (which may not be how you would have written it) but is otherwise accurate, try to let it go.

TV and Radio Media Tips

Radio and TV interviews can be exciting, but they require a little more preparation than interviews for print stories.

Practice speaking slowly, enunciating, making eye contact, and other non-verbal behavior/body language, to help you sound and look natural on the radio or TV.

TV and Radio Media Tips: Preparing for an interview

- **Be responsive to requests.** Because radio and television news programs are broadcast many times throughout the day, and may be posted online in advance of a broadcast, reporters' deadlines are urgent. If you are asked for an interview, tell the reporter yes or no as quickly as possible. Plan to meet with the reporter in person, if possible, allowing them to capture better-quality sound.

TV and Radio Media Tips: Preparing for an interview

- **Ask about the story.** Talk with the reporter about the interview before it starts and find out what their story is about and who the audience is. Find out what kinds of questions the reporter will ask and prepare your responses. Not all reporters share questions in advance. If this is the case, think about what questions might come up and prepare relevant talking points.

TV and Radio Media Tips: Preparing for an interview

- **Is it live?** Find out in advance whether the interview is edited or live. Live interviews require comfort with thinking quickly and responding off the cuff. Practice with a colleague before doing a live interview.
- **Wear plain clothes.** Dark clothes look best on TV. Avoid checkers, stripes, plaids, or other designs, as they can cause problems with color TV pictures. Avoid large, jangling, or reflective jewelry.
- **Arrive early.** Arrive at least 15 minutes before an interview if it is taking place in a studio, but remember that flexibility is the rule when dealing with television reporters. They may arrive early or late because they are preparing stories back-to-back.

TV and Radio Media Tips: During an interview

- **Speak slowly and clearly.** Use short but complete phrases and keep answers brief. Restate questions instead of saying “yes” or “no.” Enunciate. Use familiar terms. Pause between thoughts during taped interviews, allowing editors to cut snippets from your interview.
- **Use sound bites.** Prepare “sound bites,” or concise statements, that writers and editors can easily insert into a story. Be sure to use any pre-prepared three-point messages in sound bites to ensure key messages get across. For taped interviews, editors often cut interviewees’ remarks down to several seconds. A typical sound bite is 8 to 15 seconds. A long radio story is 45 seconds and a typical TV story is about 80 seconds.

TV and Radio Media Tips: During an interview

- **Be patient.** Reporters may ask a similar question over and over to get different, and perhaps more interesting, responses. Though a taped interview may last for a long time, much of it likely will not be used. Stick to core messages and answer each question as if it is the only answer that will make it to the air. If a reporter asks a multi-part question, answer the part that best addresses the topic at hand, and connect the answer to your core messages whenever possible.
- **Try again.** During a taped interview, ask for a “do-over” as needed to make answers as concise and complete as possible.

TV and Radio Media Tips: Radio interview tips

- **Go to a quiet space.** When doing a radio interview by telephone, choose a quiet location away from printers, elevator noise, humming air conditioning units, or other background noises that may distract. Use a land-line when possible for better sound quality. Turn off phone and computer notifications.

TV and Radio Media Tips: TV interview tips

- **Check your appearance.** Before sitting down for a television interview, check to ensure clothes are neat and straight and teeth are clean. Reporters are focused on doing their jobs and may not point out any problems.

TV and Radio Media Tips: TV interview tips

- **Sit – or stand – up straight.** Stand comfortably and alert — with hands at your sides. If seated, sit forward and erect. If sitting at a desk, keep hands visible. If sitting on a couch or in a casual chair, keep handles relaxed, not clasped.

TV and Radio Media Tips: TV interview tips

- Look at the reporter. During a TV interview, look at the reporter, not the camera. The only exception is in a satellite interview, when the reporter or anchor may not be on location. Ask where to look if it's not clear. Maintain eye contact, rather than shifting your eyes, when answering, to avoid looking untrustworthy.
- Pay attention to gestures. For example, a nodding head indicates agreement, so avoid doing so unless appropriate. Use natural gestures. Don't tap the table or chair, and be aware of other **nonverbal behaviors/body language**.

TV and Radio Media Tips: After an interview

- **Stay “on.”** If a TV reporter asks to chat while the camera operator shoots "B" roll (non-interview footage or cutaway shots used to round out a visual story), be sure body language and comments are appropriate. Always assume that anything said might end up in the interview, regardless of what the reporter or camera operator says.
- **Review for next time.** Obtain a recording of the final broadcast if possible and think of ways to improve in the future.

Personal Observations

- No matter how hard you try, some things may go wrong
- Reporter may have an “agenda.” Try to discuss this in advance and head it off.
- Ask if you can see an advance copy of the story, especially if print-based.
- Follow-up with reporter if they got it wrong.

What If the Patient Were Your Mother?

- A personal story about doctors failing to communicate with patients and families.
- What do patients want and expect from physicians, and what does my recent experience with my mother tell us about all of this?
- I proposed that most patients want their physicians to be available, to see them promptly when they are sick, and to not avoid them for any reason.
- Patients and families want us to communicate and keep them informed and involved in the process even when it is frustrating for the doctor or when data are conflicting.

What the reporter told me...

- She said she read my editorial and thought the messages for doctors were really important.
- She implied that the focus would be on the patient's and families point-of-view.
- She did not mention that she planned to quote me.
- She did not share the story with me before it was printed, and she did not cite my editorial.

Sick and Scared, and Waiting, Waiting, Waiting

By GINA KOLATA AUG. 20, 2005

A Doctor Sees the Other Side

As a physician himself, Dr. Philip Greenland, **chairman of the department of preventive medicine at the University of Michigan**, had always gotten deferential treatment from other doctors. If he wanted an appointment, he would page a colleague and ask to be seen that day. **He never waited for test results or for doctors to call.**



Wrap – Up and Discussion

