

“NEVER HAS SCIENCE BEEN SO MUCH UNDER THE MICROSCOPE OF PUBLIC INTEREST. IF SCIENTISTS WANT TO SUSTAIN AND IMPROVE THE RELATIVELY HIGH LEVELS OF PUBLIC TRUST THAT THEY ENJOY, THEY MUST ENGAGE. THE MEDIA STILL PROVIDE THE MOST POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE ROUTE FOR COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC. EXPERIENCE ON MANY TOPICS (FROM GM FOODS TO EMBRYO RESEARCH AND ANIMAL EXPERIMENTS) DEMONSTRATES THAT WHEN RESEARCHERS WORK WITH THE MEDIA THEY CAN GET COMPLEX AND DIFFICULT MESSAGES ACROSS.”

Prof Colin Blakemore, Director of the Centre for the Study of the Senses, University of London

“I haven’t read the report”

Most reports in science are lengthy and complex. But unless you can access an advance copy of the report, chances are you will receive it at the same time as the journalist who will begin writing straight away. We ask scientists to read the executive summaries or the parts that are directly relevant to them. This isn’t perfect; but it does ensure that experts get a say on new scientific reports.

“I did media work before and usually hated the headlines”

It is important to know that the journalists that write the piece don’t usually write the headlines. Headlines are written by subeditors, often after the journalists have gone home. However, an interesting headline (even if it isn’t precisely what you wanted) will draw readers in to read the article. You can help ensure that article is as accurate as possible.

“Journalists aren’t trustworthy, they will try and trick me into saying something I don’t mean”

Most journalists do not have any agenda within science and will do the best to report your views as accurately as they can. In particular, you can place a lot of trust in most specialist reporters, but if you are in any doubt you should check with your press officer or the Science Media Centre to give you more information about a journalist.

“I don’t have the time today”

Some of the best scientists in the country cancel important meeting and shift around their day to make sure the news media are well-informed. They understand that the news media is all about timing; you may not get the opportunity to comment on the story if you don’t act quickly.

“I hate the tabloids and won’t speak to them”

Just under 2 million people in the UK buy *The Sun* every day compared to around 400,000 people who buy *The Times*. The science and health correspondents of the tabloid newspapers are some of the best journalists in the media, and they will do their best to represent your area of science fairly – but need your help to do it.

“I have never done media work before and I’m worried about speaking to journalists for the first time”

While we wouldn’t recommend you do a confrontational interview on *Newsnight* as a media virgin, there are many interviews you can do which require less experience. Speaking to a science correspondent on a national newspaper is a good way to begin doing media work, as is an interview with a regional radio station. Asking advice from your press officer about the types of questions you may be asked is a good way to feel more confident before the interview. The Science Media Centre run ‘Introduction to the News Media’ sessions for those new to media, and if you work in a topical area ask your press officer for practical media training.

“AS ENGINEERS WE OFTEN COMPLAIN ABOUT THE LACK OF AWARENESS AMONGST THE GENERAL PUBLIC FOR OUR PROFESSION. BY CONTRIBUTING TO BREAKING STORIES ON ISSUES LIKE CLIMATE CHANGE, TRAIN CRASHES AND THE ONGOING ENERGY DEBATE WE CAN HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANT ROLE ENGINEERS PLAY IN SOCIETY ON ISSUES THE PUBLIC REALLY CARE ABOUT.”

Philip Greenish CBE, Chief Executive,
Royal Academy of Engineering



Science Media Centre

where science meets the headlines

WHY ENGAGE WITH THE NEWS MEDIA?

For more information, contact the Science Media Centre:

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WHY WORK WITH THE NEWS MEDIA?

The news media could be described as one of the worst ways to explain science, given its fast turnover, tight deadlines and space constraints. However, there are very good reasons for using this as a medium to get your messages about science across:

Possibly the best way to communicate with the public

The majority of the public get their information about science from the media (Ipsos MORI Public Attitudes to Science 2014). The more controversial the science, the more important it is for the public to hear from the most qualified experts. A quote from you in *The Sun*, *The Times*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* would reach an audience of over 13 million (based on National Readership Survey 2013/14).

If you don't speak, someone else will

We regularly speak to scientists who regret not engaging with the media the day after a story has broken. When science hits the news you often only have one chance to get accurate, evidence based information across. Not engaging with the media during this time means that someone else will, and chances are they will not know as much as you about the subject and often won't have a scientific background. Why leave the headlines to the campaigners and the politicians? You ignore the media at your peril!

“WORKING WITH THE MEDIA IS EXCITING, CHALLENGING, INFURIATING, REWARDING, EXASPERATING, SCARY AND FUN. IF YOU HAVE EVER SHOUTED AT THE RADIO OR TV OVER INACCURATE REPORTING OF SCIENCE, THEN THE BEST WAY TO COUNTER THAT IS TO GET ON RADIO OR TV AND GET THE MESSAGE ACROSS. IT'S NOT EASY, AND SOMETIMES YOUR WORDS WILL BE TAKEN OUT OF CONTEXT. BUT IF YOU DON'T STEP UP, THEN SOMEONE WITH A LESS COMPLETE KNOWLEDGE OF YOUR SUBJECT WILL.”

Prof Zoe Shipton, Professor of Geology,
University of Strathclyde

“I SPEAK TO THE MEDIA BECAUSE WHEN IT COMES TO PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF NUTRITION AND HEALTH, ACCURACY AND CONTEXT AREN'T NEGOTIABLE. ENGAGING WITH JOURNALISTS TO HELP KEEP NEWS STORIES ACCURATE IS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS OF TRANSLATING COMPLEX RESEARCH FOR THE PUBLIC. I SEE IT AS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF MY JOB AS A DIETITIAN.”

Ms Catherine Collins, Principal Dietitian,
St George's Hospital NHS Trust

You are publicly funded – do you have a duty to speak?

Most UK academics receive at least part of their funding from the public purse. People report a high degree of trust in scientists and broadly agree that science benefits people and society; do you have a responsibility to ensure the public understand the work you're doing?

Speaking in the media may get you more funding and collaborations

Many of the scientists we work with have been approached with offers of funding since their comments appeared in the media. Plus many report potential collaborators getting in touch following their work with journalists.

When science is in the news, you have an attentive audience

Before GM hit the news with 'Frankenfood' headlines, the media and the public were not interested in the issue. Tim Radford, former science editor at *The Guardian*, described the media frenzy in 1998 as a 'wonderful opportunity to educate the public about a new technology'. Though GM did not play out the way many scientists would have liked in the media, many issues that attract equally scary headlines have been covered in a more balanced way because scientists have worked closely with journalists – topics such as nanotechnology, cloning, stem cell and animal research. People are most interested in science when it is in the headlines and that is when you will gain the most from interacting with the media.

COMMON REASONS FOR NOT ENGAGING WITH THE MEDIA

“I am not the best expert”

The Science Media Centre often calls scientists who say that they are not the best expert on a subject. However, to the general public if you have published in an area, or you are familiar with the scientific context, this makes you an expert. When time is limited journalists may not be able to get through to someone else and if you don't speak they will have to resort to calling on a non-scientist to comment instead.

“I don't know the full facts and don't want to speculate”

The fast pace of the 24 hour news media means that stories often run before the full facts are available. However, this does not mean that the media won't get guests on to talk about this issue. We would rather someone who knows about the issue speaks about it and it is fine for you to say “I cannot speculate on this news because we do not know the full facts, but what we do know more generally about this issue is.....” Cautious speculation is better than silence.

“SCIENTISTS ENGAGING WITH THE MEDIA DURING THE EBOLA OUTBREAK WERE CRITICAL IN ENSURING THAT COVERAGE OF THE EPIDEMIC WAS AS ACCURATE AS POSSIBLE BY HELPING JOURNALISTS UNDERSTAND THE EPIDEMIOLOGY OF THE EBOLA OUTBREAKS, THE TREATMENTS AND VACCINES UNDER DEVELOPMENT, AND THE RISKS TO THE PUBLIC OUTSIDE WEST AFRICA. THE WORK IN BRIEFING JOURNALISTS WAS OFTEN TIME-DEMANDING, BUT IN THE END MOST JOURNALISTS WERE AN ASSET IN IMPROVING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING.”

Prof David L Heymann, Head and Senior Fellow,
Centre on Global Health Security, Chatham House