

Working with the media

Introduction

Traditional mass media (newspapers, trade press, broadcast news) offers a platform for disseminating research findings to a huge audience. If your research catches the attention of journalists, the media can quickly raise the profile of an issue or an individual. It is also a significant tool when trying to engage policymakers and influencers. All of this means that being able to harness the power of the media in the right situation is a highly valuable communications skill.

Media coverage does, however, come with some risks – the main one being that an aspect of your study or findings may be misrepresented. There is also the question of return on time invested: if the news agenda on the day goes in a different direction, the work you have put into generating coverage may not return a result at all.

Deciding whether to invest time in engaging journalists and securing media coverage for your study is, initially, a question of weighing up the risks and opportunities in the following table.

Opportunities	Risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very wide audience reach. • You can amplify audience reach by retweeting/emailing links of any coverage to your own followers and contacts. • Media coverage is a 'third party' endorsement of the significance of your research study. • It is possible to be targeted and strategic about media coverage by dealing with sector media (eg HSJ, Nursing Times, Local Government Chronicle, etc). • It holds the potential to gain credibility with decision makers and gain visibility for your study/organisation. • Funders like being associated with research that sets the media agenda and promotes debate. • It could be argued that wider dissemination is in the public interest, as it promotes credible experts and expertise to inform public debate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your findings may be misinterpreted. • The effort you put into trying to generate media coverage may not lead to results. • By putting your research 'out there' it is possible for it to be used to support political or social agendas that you would not normally associate with. • Depending on the level of interest generated you could find yourself having to deal with a large response from other media as well as the public, patients or their families. • If contacted by the media before you have published findings, be wary of how much you communicate or this may jeopardise opportunities for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

Is your research newsworthy?

Before embarking on media work it is necessary to take an objective look at whether your research is truly 'newsworthy'. Newsworthiness does not have an automatic connection to the quality of the study. Some research has an appeal to journalists, some less so.

Research with media appeal often has the following qualities.

- It reveals something new – the findings can point to meaningful change or the potential for change.
- The findings or subject are of interest to the media outlet's audience. In some instances this could be quite specialised (such as Nursing Times) but the principle is that this needs to relate to something that an audience already knows and cares about.
- The findings add to a body of knowledge on a topic that currently has high public, policy or practitioner interest.

Not all research will lend itself to the media agenda. If this is the case, there are other **communications options** available to reach your audiences.

Packaging your story

A recurrent theme in media outlets is that resources are scarce. Therefore, the easier it is for a journalist to cover your research and findings, the better. You may wish to consider the following when presenting your story.

- **We are hardwired to respond to stories.** The more human interest or impact your research findings can demonstrate, the higher the news interest is likely to be.
- **Cover the 'who, what, where, when, how?' basics** when setting out your press release (see resources below to link to detailed guidance on this) but also answer the 'so what?' (Why does this matter? What could this change? Who or what could this influence or have an impact on?).
- **Give examples** of the people this may affect and, even better, provide case studies of people that journalists are able to interview to give life to a story.
- **Provide brief, accessible background notes** that set your study in context. Journalists may know very little about your research area – help them to understand it quickly.
- **Enable access.** Line up the potential spokespersons and make sure that they are available. Be available and willing to answer the phone and provide duplicate or additional information depending on the journalist's needs.
- **Provide images:** infographics, photos, simple charts – anything to clearly and concisely illustrate your findings.
- **News outlets are multiplatform** – every magazine has a website, Twitter feed, Instagram account, etc. If you can provide material for each of these channels you are maximising your exposure in that media outlet.

- Proximity, particularly for TV journalists, is important. Long-distance travel is only possible for the highest ranking news stories. You will need to ensure that spokespersons and locations are within easy reach or, if resources allow (perhaps via a university press office), supply your own video footage.

Linking to ‘breaking news’

There may be times when your research becomes newsworthy because of other developments in the news agenda. It may be possible to contribute to these stories, either as a source of expert knowledge, or comment (if your findings are not yet available), or to highlight your findings if they have been published. But what is the best way to approach the media in these circumstances?

- Be sure that you can add something new or different to the debate.
- Act fast. Package what you think are the relevant aspects of your knowledge or findings and approach journalists quickly.
- Link whatever you have to the breaking news – don’t assume that journalists will make the direct connection if it needs some explanation.
- Twitter or email is ideal for these approaches but ensure that your headline summarises what you can contribute in a punchy way or it may get overlooked.
- Think about national and local media. If it is an international story, can you add a national perspective? Or if it is a national story, is there something that you can supply that paints the picture regionally?

Identifying journalists

If you are associated with a university or organisations with a communications team, you may have access to a media database. These are searchable under keywords (eg health correspondent) and are a good place to start to understand the key journalists in your area of research.

Journalists use Twitter, so following them and offering insight or information in order to build a relationship with them should pay dividends when it comes to issuing your media information.

Any monitoring services that you have in place (eg **Google Alerts**) should indicate who is writing about a subject on the web. However, free services rarely give a comprehensive view of media coverage – they should not be used in isolation.

Finally, any opportunities you have to meet with journalists and correspondents face-to-face are invaluable. The major national conferences can be good for this but be prepared: you will need to be able to sum up what you are doing and why it may be of interest in a succinct and accessible way. Even if you are not able to meet them in person, knowing which journalists attended a conference can be a strong indication of their interest in this area.

Maximising coverage

When you do secure coverage, ensure that you amplify it by tweeting and emailing links to it to your contacts and stakeholders. Remember to alert key stakeholders in your organisation, as well as research partners and funders.

Media training

If your organisation offers the opportunity to attend a training course on working with the media, it is well worth the time if you are going to actively pursue media coverage of your work. These courses offer invaluable tips (usually from media professionals) on radio and TV interview styles, how to avoid jargon, and speaking in concise, plain English to get your points across. They also usually give people a chance to try all these out in simulations of a range of media interactions.

Resources

- The Economic and Social Research Council's **best practice guide for working with the media** includes practical guidance on writing press releases, giving interviews, etc.
- The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) also provides **guidance on working with the media**, including local radio, writing for a non-specialist audience, etc.
- For guidance on how to communicate controversial subjects, how to handle interviews in different formats and how to manage any follow-on correspondence with interested patients and families, see the Wellcome Trust's **How to work with the media**.
- The Science Media Centre has published **top tips for scientists undertaking media work**, which also contains checklists to help you prepare for interviews.