

You and the media

- some general advice

Why you should engage

- **If you don't, someone else will** – if a journalist has been told to file a story, then they will. If they don't get a comment from you then they'll try a lesser expert and then a lesser expert until someone says "yes".
- **Public understanding** – public opinion on key issues counts and the majority of people get their scientific knowledge from the media.
- **Academic benefits** – aside from frequently being funded by public money, many funding bodies require evidence of public engagement. Media coverage also raises academic profiles and can lead to collaboration and academic opportunities

The first things you should consider

Be prepared:

- **What are your three key points?** – Always know the three key points you want to make. You will kick yourself if you come away from an interview and didn't say what you wanted to say. Your three key points should be the things that, if nothing else, you want the public to hear. They will keep you on track if the questions go off on a weird tangent or it's a contentious issue. Just remember your three points.
- **Can you summarise your research in a single sentence?** – Throughout your career, make sure you can explain what you do and why people should care in a concise, jargon-free statement. Ideally it should be a single sentence; if they're still hooked then you can always expand.
- **Ditch the jargon** – if you can't be understood, then you can't help. Pretend you're talking to Aunt Mabel. Analogies are great, but make sure you have them thought out in advance.
- **How is the story being framed?** – How are media outlets covering the story? A quick search on the web will give you the context behind the call.
- **Do you know your media officer?** – They can be a fabulous resource. They can help you prepare, tell you about the journalists, write media releases and proactively get your message out. Save their number in your phone or stick it to your computer.
- **Get media training** – your institution or funding body should be able to help.
- **You can always call the AusSMC for advice.**

When a journalist calls you, remember to ask questions

Who, what, when, why and where:

- **Who are they** – science specialist or general reporter? If you have any doubts, then contact your media officer or ask the AusSMC.
- **What** – TV, radio or print? News, current affairs or magazine style?
- **When** – what's the deadline? Can you call them back? How long do you have?
- **Why** are they doing the story? What's the news peg? What are they trying to find out?
- **Where** – do they need you to go to a studio or come to you, is over the phone okay?

Think!

- **Remember your three key points**
- **Expertise** – you are an expert if you work in the field. If it's really not your area, then recommend someone else or pass them to the AusSMC.
- **The journalist** – how much do they know about the subject? Who have they already spoken to and who will they be speaking to after you?
- **The audience** – remember you are always talking to the interested public at home. What do you want them to know? Is it a specialist audience? What will their level of knowledge be?
- **Take their contact details** – you may need to speak to them again.

Handling the questions

- **Say what you want to say** – remember your three key points.
- **Stick to what you know** – if you don't know the answer, then say so, but then say what you do know.
- **Controversy** – if the journalist or another interviewee is antagonistic, then stay calm and return to your key points – remember that you're talking to the undecided audience at home. Attacking the interviewer will only make you look bad.
- **If science doesn't have the answer, say so** – but explain the reason why – still investigating, limits of knowledge, need a bigger computer, unethical to test on humans, etc.
- **Irrelevant questions** – if they ask a nonsensical or off-tangent question then simply lead it back to your three key points.

Getting your research into the media

- **Do you have some interesting research about to be published?** – The moment that you get your paper accepted then you should be thinking about the media. You should let your media officer (and us) know what the topic is and when it's due to be published. Many journals publish online first and that is when the story will appear in the media. The journal will set an embargo – and that's the information you need.
- **Do you have a lay summary?** – You should ideally be able to describe your research in a single sentence anyway, but now is the chance to expand and get the journalists interested.
- **Who, what, why, how, where and when?** – Journalists always have the same basic questions:
- **Who has done the research?** – This doesn't mean listing all your collaborators, this means mentioning the key scientists and their organisations.
- **What have you done/found out?** – Unlike a peer-reviewed article, you start with the implications and back them up with the results.
- **Why have you done it and why should the public care?** – The media is created for the public; the story has to resonate with the parent driving their kids to school or the teenager watching the TV. There has to be the human interest, whether it's the first, biggest, cutest, strangest or most important.

Getting your research into the media (Continued)

- **How did you make this amazing discovery?** – What clever bit of kit or keen insight did you have to employ?
- **Where was this done?** – On the moon, in your back shed, on a ship, down a mine? Which city, state and country? Journalists love local stories because they interest their readers.
- **When did you do it or when will it be finished?** – Have you just finished this research? If it's a new piece of technology, then when will we be able to buy it?
- **What images, video, graphics and sounds do you have?** – With all the pressure to entertain an easily bored audience, the difference between getting no coverage and a cupboard full can be as simple as a pretty picture. Make sure that anything you have is in the highest quality possible. And, although it might sound strange, anything with red in it will be more popular as it catches the eye.
- **Embargoes** – scientific journals, and others, rely on embargoes (an agreement not to tell a story before a set time and date) in order to gain as much coverage as possible and to ensure more accurate coverage of the science – the theory being that journalists use the time to understand the issues. Putting an embargo on your story gives you more time to brief journalists and more control over when the story will appear.
- **Choosing your media** – don't dismiss tabloids or talkback radio – both reach far more people than the more serious media outlets and should not be ignored.

What to do if you are unhappy with the results

- **How big an issue is it?** – Be realistic – did they get a few facts wrong that only your peers would notice or is it something that changes the message of the piece?
- **Call the journalist** – stay calm and polite but find out what happened – they might be equally angry because sub-editors changed things after they filed the story.
- **Changing online** – while a journalist may not be able to print something again or do another broadcast, they might be able to change details and text online.
- **Contact the AusSMC** – we work with journalists and their colleagues on a daily basis, so get in touch with us, we will see what we can do to help and advise how to proceed.

Press complaints:

- The Australian Press Council is the principal body with responsibility for responding to complaints about Australian newspapers, magazines and associated digital outlets:

www.presscouncil.org.au/complaints/
- The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is a statutory authority within the Federal Government portfolio of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. The ACMA is responsible for the regulation of: broadcasting, the internet, radio-communications and telecommunications:

www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_90137