

- Find your **press officer** – they can give you help and advice on doing media work. Keep their name, office and mobile number to hand in case a journalist calls you. Also, you should get yourself a **mobile phone** and make sure that your press officer has the number.
- If you expect to be doing a lot of media work in the future ask your press officer whether they can get you some **media training**.
- Practice speaking about your work in **jargon free** language to non scientists (try writing about your work in 150 words). Do not use acronyms or measurements that the public may not understand.
- If you have an important paper coming out in a high profile **journal** find out if the journal is going to highlight your work in their press release – if it is, make yourself available for interviews around the date of the press release and publication date.
- Before speaking to a journalist, decide on **3 key messages** that you want to put across in the interview. If you are asked a question that does not relate to your 3 points, try to get back to the subjects you want to cover using phrases such as ‘what we must remember is...’, ‘the really important point is...’, ‘interestingly...’.
- Think about whether anything about your area of research is **controversial** – if there are topics that are tricky to deal with in media interview, you should think how to deal with questions on these issues.
- Get in touch with the **Science Media Centre** if you are interested in doing media work. The SMC offers you the chance to attend our ‘Introduction to the News Media’ event, and give support and advice when your area of science hits the headlines.

“A print journalist will write up to six stories a day. Working to these deadlines while competing with the story of the day, be it a bomb in Iraq or a politician resigning, means we rely on experts who get back to us quickly, can simplify the science and who are prepared to take time to help us get the story right.”
Mark Henderson, Science Editor, The Times

Firstly, find out why the journalist is phoning, what is the reason for writing this story now (their peg)? You should also check where the journalist is calling from, are they a newspaper, radio or TV journalist? And which programme or publication?

Newspaper

- Find out what the journalist’s **deadline** is – it could be in 10 minutes and they need you to respond immediately.
- You are entitled to **phone the journalist back in a few minutes** to give you time to collect your thoughts – but make sure you phone them back in the time frame promised.
- You don’t have to have the best publication record in the world to comment in the media – for the consumers of national news if you work in the area you are an expert.
- If the enquiry really isn’t in your area, **recommend someone else** who might be suitable – even if you don’t have their contact details the journalists can find them through their press office or the SMC.
- Always take the **journalist’s contact details**, so you can get back in touch if you think of something important later on.
- If you need **more information**, and there is time before the journalist’s deadline, you can ask to see the press release or paper related to the story.
- Because of time constraints and issues surrounding editorial independence print journalists very rarely **check their copy** back with scientists, so don’t expect to see the finished article before it is published.
- Remember that the **tabloids** have very large circulations (3 million people read *The Sun* daily while 400,000 read the *Guardian*) so by speaking to them you will be getting your message to a larger audience than by speaking to the broadsheets. In addition, the tabloid journalists produce some of the best and most accurate coverage of science issues in the media.

- Will the interview be **live or pre-recorded**? Although live interviews may sound daunting they have the advantage of not being ‘cut’ before the broadcast.
- If you have to go to the studio the TV/radio station will often **send a car** for you or pay for you to get a taxi.
- Get the **contact details of the journalist** who is organising the interview – you might need to find out why your transport hasn’t arrived or if the camera crew is lost!
- If you are doing an interview on a controversial topic, ask if you will be **head to head** with someone who has an opposing view point. If you are, and have time before the interview, try to find out about their views on the subject.
- Sometimes you can find out the **first question** that you will be asked from the journalist organising your interview. Although they won’t always know what it will be, any advice can help you prepare and boost your confidence at the start of the interview.
- If you are struggling with too many requests for interviews from journalists, ask **your press officer** for help. They should be able to take calls for you and help manage your interview schedule.
- When you are doing an interview try not to repeat back the questions to the interviewer. If possible, you should make your answers stand-alone, succinct statements.

“Remember that news interviews are your chance to share your expertise with the wider British public. It’s heartbreaking how often scientists waste this opportunity to get the best information out there in the public domain because they go into the interview obsessed with impressing their peers, or John Humphries or the man from the protest group sitting next to them. The best rule of thumb is to ignore all these people and target your main messages at the tens of thousands of people watching or listening at home, many of whom are concerned about the subject and need to hear from the real experts.”
Fiona Fox, Director, Science Media Centre

- Find out whether you are expected to go into the **studio** or whether you can do an interview over the phone (down the line). Radio stations will prefer doing an interview on a landline rather than a mobile phone if you are not going to the studio.
- Sometimes journalists will ask if you can do the interview through an **ISDN** line (high quality phone line) – your press office may have one of these which may mean you don't have to go to a studio.
- Keep a **pen and paper** with you to make notes (and have your 3 key points to hand), but make sure you don't rustle the papers or make noise during the interview.

TV

- Find out if you need to go to the studio or whether they have the resources to send a **camera crew** to you.
- If a camera crew is coming to interview you, **set some time aside** – it will take longer than you imagine as they will almost certainly do a number of takes.
- Take information to read with you if you are **travelling to the studio** – use this time to decide on your 'key points'.
- Try to **dress neatly** and avoid wearing anything that may be distracting on screen *e.g.* dangly earrings, brightly patterned shirts or cartoon ties.
- Try to keep still during the interview – moving around or waving your hands around will distract the viewer from what you are saying. Smile and try to be aware of your body language (*e.g.* don't cross your arms, gesticulate wildly or slouch in your chair).

"Scientists often worry about whether everything they say is absolutely accurate, but to get the message across to the general public through the media you have to simplify your science. It is important to concentrate on the overall message instead of worrying about the finer details."

Jenny Gimpel, Media Manager, UCL

- What is the journalist's peg for the story – why are they doing this now?
- What is their angle on the story – what is their focus going to be?
- Who else have they spoken to/is there someone else that will be interviewed with you?
- Do they want you to come to the studio? If so, can they organise transport?
- Take all the contact details for the journalist you are dealing with.
- Do they want to do the interview live or pre-recorded?
- How long will the interview last for?
- Can they tell you what the first question will be?
- Before the interview decide what your 3 key points will be.

Remember that if you don't do the interview – the journalist may end up interviewing someone else less qualified. By speaking to journalists you really can improve the way your area of science is covered in the news!

"Journalists try very hard to get what you say right, but that is not to say you won't have to odd bad experience. Despite this remember that engaging with the media is one of the best ways of preventing the scare stories of the future."

Adam Finn, vaccine scientist

The Science Media Centre is an independent venture working to promote the voices, stories and views of the scientific community to the news media when science is in the headlines. If you would like to find out more please visit:

www.sciencemediacentre.org

or contact: smc@sciencemediacentre.org

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top tips for media work

a guide for scientists

This guide offers tips for those who are new to doing news media work. It gives the main points that you should consider before doing media work and helpful hints that may be useful if you have to do TV, radio or newspaper interviews.

The SMC also produces guides on communicating *How Science Works*. These prepare you for dealing with some difficult questions around risk, scientific uncertainty and animal research, such as 'How do we know this is safe?' 'How can we trust your research?' 'Why is there uncertainty in your work?' 'Why are you using animals in your research?' They may all be downloaded from our website and are available in printed format.

"The media is the most powerful and effective tool that scientists can use to get their message across. Print and broadcast media reaches out to those in the public who may not seek out information about science and will undoubtedly influence their attitudes to controversial areas of science including animal research, GM crops and nanotechnology."

Baroness Susan Greenfield
Director of The Royal Institution of Great Britain

"90% of the general public get most of their information about science from the media."

MORI poll to mark the opening of the Science Media Centre in 2002

For more information contact the Science Media Centre:
020 7670 2980
smc@sciencemediacentre.org
www.sciencemediacentre.org

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