

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

87% of the public get the majority of their information about science from the media (data from Ipsos MORI Public Attitudes to Science 2011). In controversial or fast moving areas of science, the public deserve to have the best information about the science from the people best qualified to talk about the subject – i.e. you, the scientist.

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!

“ I SPEAK TO JOURNALISTS BECAUSE I CARE ABOUT THE WAY MY AREA OF SCIENCE IS COVERED IN THE NEWS, AND I KNOW BY WORKING WITH THE MEDIA I CAN ENSURE THEY HAVE THE BEST INFORMATION TO WORK WITH. HOWEVER, THERE ARE OTHER BENEFITS – SOME THAT I DIDN'T EXPECT. FOR EXAMPLE, AS A DIRECT RESULT OF SPEAKING ABOUT MY WORK IN THE MEDIA, I WAS OFFERED INDUSTRY FUNDING, AND HAVE FORGED INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS.”

Christopher Shaw, Professor of Neurology and Neurogenetics, King's College London

“ INCREASINGLY AS A RESEARCH FUNDING BODY WE ARE RECOGNISING THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING SCIENTISTS WHO DISSEMINATE THEIR RESEARCH FINDINGS AND THEIR EXPERTISE TO THE MEDIA. THIS IS SOMETHING THAT NO DOUBT WE WILL RECOGNISE EVEN MORE IN THE FUTURE.”

Professor Mark Walport, former Director of the Wellcome Trust, current Chief Scientific Advisor

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.



Science Media Centre
where science meets the headlines

WHY ENGAGE WITH THE NEWS MEDIA?

For more information, contact the Science Media Centre:

020 7611 8300

smc@sciencemediacentre.org

www.sciencemediacentre.org

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.

“BREAKING NEWS STORIES WHICH GENERATE NEGATIVE HEADLINES CAN BE INTIMIDATING. FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN A PHASE I CLINICAL TRIAL CAUSED VOLUNTEERS TO HAVE MAJOR HEALTH PROBLEMS, MANY SCIENTISTS WERE SCARED TO PUT THEIR HEAD ABOVE THE PARAPET. HOWEVER, I AND A FEW OTHERS USED THE NEGATIVE STORY TO TALK ABOUT THE WAY CLINICAL TRIALS ARE CARRIED OUT IN THE NEWS MEDIA. NOT ONLY DID THIS PREVENT A PUBLIC BACKLASH AGAINST CLINICAL TRIALS, BUT AFTER THE MEDIA COVERAGE THE MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL REPORTED AN INCREASE IN THOSE PEOPLE CONTACTING THEM INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN TRIALS.”

Professor Chris Higgins, Vice-Chancellor,
Durham University

“ IN MY AREA, RESEARCHING GUT FLORA AND THE IMPACT OF PROBIOTICS, THERE IS A LOT OF INTEREST FROM BOTH THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC. THIS INEVITABLY MEANS THAT THERE IS A LOT OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT THIS SUBJECT, AND I SEE IT AS PART OF MY RESPONSIBILITY AS A SCIENTIST TO MAKE MY EXPERTISE AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC. AND THERE ARE OTHER UPSIDES, AS I HAVE AT LEAST ONE LOT OF FUNDING THAT CAME DIRECTLY AS A RESULT OF MEDIA WORK.”

Glenn Gibson, Professor of Food Microbial Sciences,
University of Reading

“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 I hated the headlines”

It is important to know that the journalists that write the piece don't 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 meetings, 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”

Around 2 million people in the UK buy the Sun every day compared to around 200,000 people who buy the Guardian. 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