

TIPS FOR ENGAGING WITH THE MEDIA

Prepare your pitch to a journalist

Most journalists want to talk to you. With a little research you can make it easy for them to respond and want to interview you about your work.

- **Show you know their work.** Specifically, not generically — name the piece you read.
- **Connect your work to their beat.** Say why your research intersects with what they already cover.
- **Say why it's a story.** Is it interesting, or is it significant? It doesn't need to be both, but know which one you're leading with. It can be both!
- **Offer a key takeaway to pique their interest.** Try to develop one sentence that captures a key point of the research in language a reader would understand.

Do your homework on the journalist and prepare for the interview

Do background on the journalist by reading their recent work, know who they write for and what angle they tend to take. Expect them to ask questions in a skeptical and curious way, seeking to learn what is new or significant about your work.

Come prepared for the interview by writing down exactly what you want to say. Keep these key points with you during the interview to keep you focused if the questions go in a different direction. Think about your research or your programmatic work, and write down:

- **Three things you want to get across,** one plain sentence each. If you don't choose them, the interview will choose for you.
- **Three things you'll need to correct,** and how you'll correct each in the moment. A rehearsed correction sounds calm; an improvised one sounds defensive.
- **One quote-ready sentence** that captures the key finding.

Understand on-the-record, off-the-record, and on background

If you have information that you want to share with a journalist, but are not comfortable being quoted or identified, you should discuss this directly at the start of the conversation.

Journalists will protect your identity as a source; this is a core professional norm, not a favor. Agree explicitly what "on background" or "off the record" means before you share anything. If you're weighing this, talk to the journalist about source protection first. Most professional journalists will work with you to negotiate an agreement that you are both comfortable with.

Know your organization's policy about engaging with the media

Research your institution's policies that describe how staff can speak to the press before you start a conversation with a journalist. A few items to understand include:

- What requires communications sign-off, and what doesn't
- Whether you can speak in a personal capacity, and how to say so clearly
- What your funder agreements say about public comment

During the interview, you are the expert

A few general tips to remember during any interview with a journalist:

- Lead with your key point, then the caveat — not the reverse
- Try to provide one idea per sentence; this helps journalist find a "quote"
- Silence is fine. Do not rush, it's better to think and pause before answering
- If a question rests on a wrong premise, correct the premise first
- If you misspeak, say so and restate it cleanly

Quote vs. information

Everything you say during an interview is either meant to (1) convey information or (2) serve as a quote. Most of what you say is **information**, meant to provide context, caveats, and background information to help the journalist understand your work and get the story correct. During the course of the conversation, you might provide a **quote**, which is a memorable sentence that captures a key point of the research and can stand alone on the page.

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."

If you don't know, say so. It's OK. It protects your credibility, and it beats a guess that has to be walked back later. Offer to follow up, or point them to someone who does know.

Using statistics to counter misinformation

Numbers and data are one of your strongest tools for correcting a false claim and countering misinformation and challenging skeptics. It is often most effective to choose a data point that helps convey the human impact of your research and the health / science topic.

Tips to correct information during an interview

When you need to challenge or correct something that a journalist says, you can do so in a way that is direct but non-confrontational. You can start at a place where you have common ground and respectfully share evidence to support your case.

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