

## Introduction

Communicating research findings to potential users outside the academic community – whether in government, in business, in the voluntary sector or in the general public – has become an essential element in most social scientists' working lives.

And one of the most effective ways of reaching your target audiences, influencing policy and practice and changing public opinion is to make use of the media. This publication provides some practical guidelines on how to develop a media strategy that will enable your research, your research programme or your research institution to have a greater impact on the national debate.

## What is a media strategy?

These days, more and more researchers and research institutions want to communicate with users of their output.

Whether the goal is to influence policy and practice, to justify public funding for their work or to tap into additional resources and networks that will contribute to the research process, the importance and value of disseminating results to the widest possible audience is now almost universally recognised. That requires a communications strategy, and at the heart of your communications strategy, should be a carefully articulated media strategy that allows you to manage your relationship with the media.

A good media strategy will start by taking the target audiences for your research output and defining the most effective way to reach them through the media. It should address how the media can best be used to publicise research and influence debate. And once you've got media attention for your research, it should help you decide what to do with it. Your strategy should also specify the resources, both financial and human, that will be needed to promote your findings and manage the feedback you get.

For a research centre, programme or department, one key decision to make is whether to hire a press officer or media consultant. Dealing with the media can absorb an enormous amount of time and some researchers may not be suited for it. Having one person responsible for media relations can generate economies of scale, giving a focus to your media strategy, helping to build relationships with key journalists and developing your 'brand'.

At the same time, it is possible that the cost of a press officer may be better employed in training your researchers in dealing with the media and obliging them to publicise

their work on the principle that no one can promote work better than the people who did it. In this context, it is worth distinguishing between the press officer as gate-opener and the press officer as spokesperson. The former can be very useful, guiding journalists to the people they need to talk to, making sure communications run smoothly and managing the production and distribution of press releases. The latter may not be so valuable: journalists are likely to find that a spokesperson does not know enough, is not qualified to provide quotable comments and is no substitute for a real researcher.

Individual researchers will, of course, have little choice but to do the work themselves. But that is no reason not to think strategically about your media interactions. It is quite possible to plan a campaign to promote yourself and your research, and to think through what the consequences will be once your name becomes familiar to journalists as a reliable source for both new ideas and insights on current news stories.

## Why should you develop a media strategy?

### Can social science survive without the media?

These days, the Research Councils constantly have to justify the public money that goes into research in terms of its outcomes and impact. So while the ESRC is in the business of funding research of the highest quality across a broad range of topics, it is also in the business of knowledge transfer – enhancing the public understanding of social science and communicating that research to people who can make use of it.

To be effective in that mission, to change perceptions, you need to be innovative and go for your target audiences through the media. There are many different publics for research, but the press and broadcast media form the most visible route to reach them. They are the conduits to the ultimate users of research – policymakers, commercial organisations, non-profits and the general public. And successful engagement with the media requires a deliberate consideration of strategy and resources. What's more:

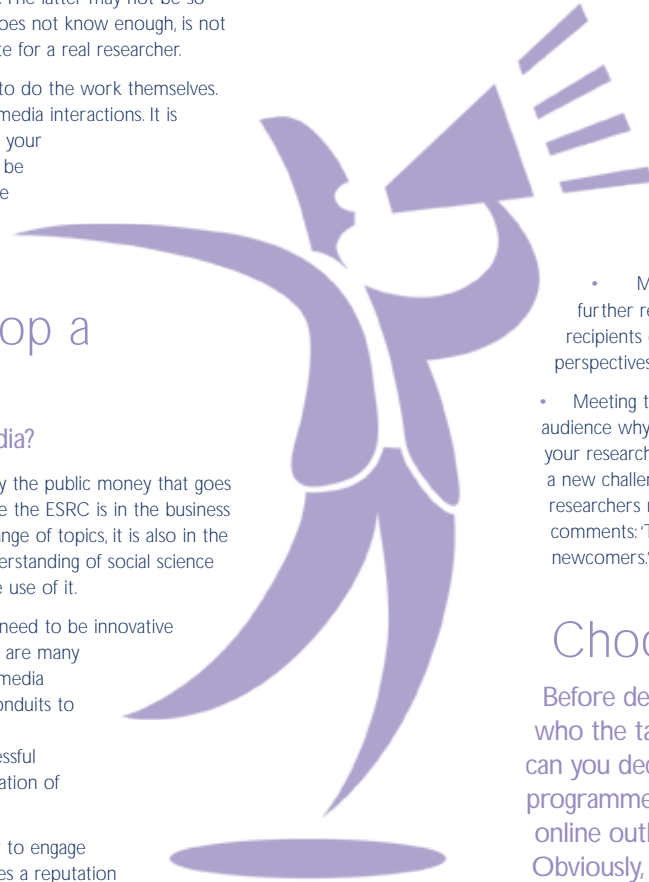
- To influence policy, social scientists have no choice but to engage with the media. The public profile it provides establishes a reputation for advice, which policymakers may follow up. Indeed, for politicians in particular, a piece of research may only become 'real' when it has appeared in a newspaper: then they need to absorb it since they may be asked about it or have it quoted against them.

- Media profile can also help with raising additional funding for research, attracting offers of consultancy work and/or promoting the brand name of your institution. In future, as higher education becomes more of a marketplace and universities compete more vigorously to attract funds and good students, it is conceivable that your remuneration will be influenced by your contribution to your university's public image.
  - Media attention can also raise the public profile of your discipline. Natural scientists have become highly adept at communication in recent years and this has raised public interest in scientific issues. Social scientists, traditionally seen by journalists as poor communicators, can now try to reverse that opinion, emulate the success of the natural scientists and increase public discussion of social science research.
  - Media profile may make it easier to gather data and case studies for further research. Nowadays, users play a valuable role not simply as recipients of the end results but as contributors of ideas, contacts, different perspectives, even data resources throughout the research process.
- Meeting the challenge of explaining in a limited space and to a general audience why research is important helps to focus your thinking and sharpen your research agenda. Working with the media can also be a lot of fun and offer a new challenge and a new impetus to the development of your career. Some researchers may even aspire to become media dons. As one journalist comments: 'There are very few in the social sciences and plenty of scope for newcomers.'

## Choosing your targets

Before designing your media strategy, you need to establish who the target audiences are for your research. Only then can you decide in which publications and on which programmes from the vast range of print, broadcast and online outlets you should be aiming for coverage.

Obviously, central targets will be those with the greatest impact and/or the greatest number of readers and viewers. These tend to be the national broadsheets, the major weeklies and the main news and current affairs programmes on



terrestrial TV. It is also worth thinking about more niche outlets – specialist publications, local press and media elsewhere in the world.

In thinking through your target media, you will find a clear distinction between those where there is a real shortage of space – the quality press and top TV and radio programmes – and those with space to fill – rolling news, start-up TV channels and most electronic media. With the former, you will be in competition to get coverage for your research stories; with the latter, it may be considerably easier and though the audiences you reach are smaller, these are good training grounds.

Once you've chosen your targets, you need to be familiar with what you're targeting. Look through the national newspapers regularly (not just your favourites) and ask yourself what are the key ingredients of the news stories they carry related to your field. Watch the programmes that might cover your work and consider what angles they take and what commentators they use. Overall, engage with public debate so that on the one hand, you are up to date with the news, and on the other, you can begin to see how your research might fit into the national conversation.

Following the media in this way will lead you to become familiar with which journalists are likely to be interested in your work. You're rarely going to have an impact on the editor of *The Times*, for example. But you will interest the economics correspondent, the social affairs correspondent, the public policy correspondent, the crime correspondent, the health correspondent – whoever it is for whom your research is relevant. And you should aim to build a database of these people and turn them into your media contacts. You can also supplement your database by making use of the variety of media directories like *Media Disc*.

Your database will be constantly evolving as you identify journalists with whom it is worthwhile being in touch. Some will be journalists covering a specific beat that overlaps with your research territory. Some will be journalists in related fields, such as business and finance for an economic researcher. And some will be the columnists and commentators who pontificate regularly on all sorts of topics and whose articles and broadcast slots may occasionally need decorating with some real research. But whoever they are, it is important that you read their publications from time to time. And a simple but often neglected point: do make sure you get their names and addresses right and keep their details up to date.

At the core of your database will be a handful of journalists whose interests align very closely with your own. If your work is in education, they may be the education editors of the national press. With these kinds of people, you should aim to build relationships based on direct personal contact. Through periodic meetings and regular reading of their articles, you can learn to understand their needs and interests, get an insight into their world, provide advice when they need it and from time to time offer exclusives.

This will inevitably pay off in terms of consistent media mentions of your research output and of your perspectives on the news they cover.

In this context, it is worth noting that while journalists may sometimes be lazy, they are not usually stupid and should be treated with the same respect as your professional colleagues. They will often identify the flaw in an argument very quickly, and rarely fail to grasp the implications of a piece of research if the work is properly explained. As one media don observes of his experiences with journalists: 'among the quality dailies, they are mostly cleverer than my colleagues. They have brilliant degrees and often PhDs, but they also have good sense and quickness of mind.'

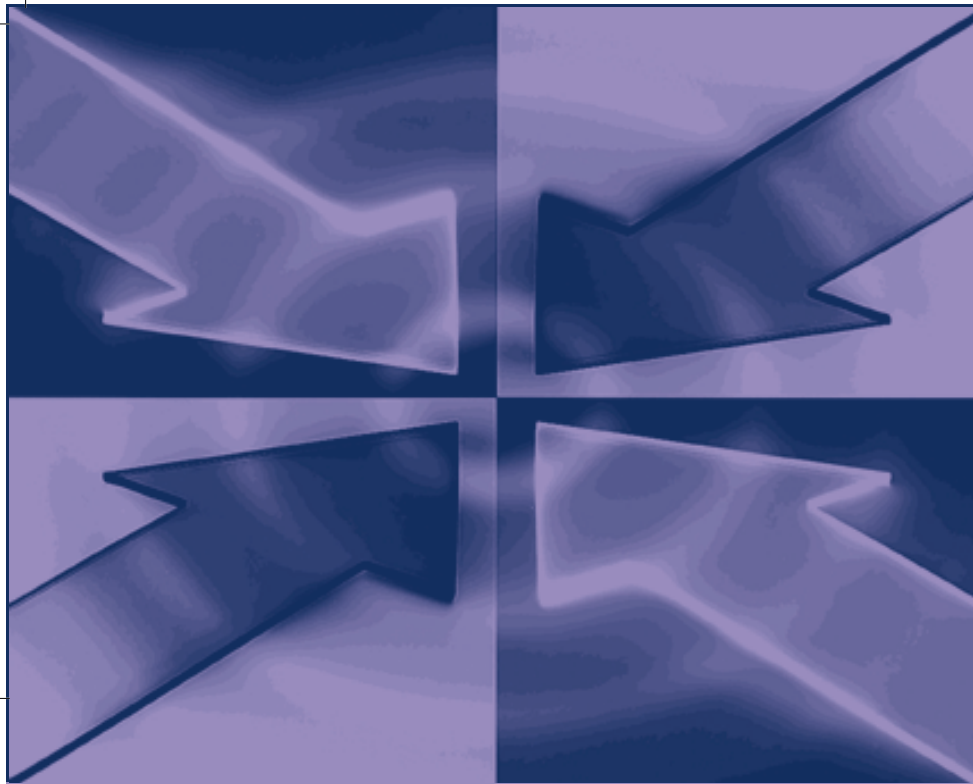
## Issuing press releases

At the heart of any research institution's media strategy should be a steady stream of press releases to your database of journalists. These should summarise in a punchy, accessible form the findings of research projects, either those published in books, working papers, scholarly journals or special reports prepared for a wider audience or which will be presented at academic conferences or public events. They should rarely announce the launch of new projects: the media are interested in results, not what you plan to do.

A central part of this activity should be to establish some 'branding' for the releases so that journalists expect a certain kind of high-quality research on topics of current interest and turn to your institution for comment on matters in which you've previously indicated expertise. Such branding may simply involve a particular colour notepaper headed with your institution's logo. But be careful not to have too many brands involved: it can be confusing if your institution, department, university and funding body are all listed as participants in your research project.

It is usually worth issuing press releases around self-made 'hooks' – 'at a conference happening today, Professor X will say...' or 'a report published this week reveals that...'. In general, you should also put an embargo at the top of the release: 'not for publication or broadcast before 00:00 hours on...'. An embargo gives journalists time to do further research on the story in the knowledge that no competitors will publish before them.

Remember that if journalists want more information, they'll come first to you, so do make sure you are reachable at all hours between the time of issuing the release and the embargo. Researchers are notorious for being rather elusive people: try not to be



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when the media will be trying to contact you. If possible, give a mobile telephone number, and if you are left a message, always return the call immediately.

## How to write a press release

A press release should be written so as to make your research accessible to a wider public, setting out why it is important and what you hope it shows. It should not be the abstract of a scholarly paper.

First, remember that it is unlikely you are so famous that journalists will report what you say just because you say it. You must instead convince the press that you have something interesting to say – perhaps a new ‘fact’ about the world, a new way of looking at an important issue or something that links into an active policy debate. And you should be wary of journalists’ potential reaction: ‘Another piece of research from the University of the Bleeding Obvious.’ The key question to ask of any findings you plan to press release is ‘so what?’.

Second, try to be concrete and specific. Don’t say ‘My research suggests that if taxes go up, the divorce rate goes down’. By how much? ‘Raising the tax rate to 50 per cent would reduce the rate of divorce by half’. Precise new data, together with details of how you got them, can often make interesting news.

Third, don’t qualify or hedge your results any more than is necessary. Of course, your results depend on your assumptions, but don’t dwell too much on this. Above all, avoid too much OTOH OTOH – ‘on the one hand, higher x may result in lower y. On the other hand, it may not’. This is interesting if an entire policy has been based on higher x causing lower y, but in most cases OTOH OTOH will leave your audience with the impression that your research is inconclusive and not worthy of attention. Similarly, saying ‘further research is needed’ (as it invariably is) suggests you haven’t reached a conclusion worth writing about.

In terms of length, the press summary should be no longer than 600 words of text and ideally printed on two sides of a single sheet of paper. At the end, you should list your contact details: numbers where journalists can reach you day and night, your e-mail address, and your website if it is possible to get further details on the work from there.

Try to identify three or four key points, set them out clearly on the first page, then elaborate on them in the body of the release. Remember that you should work from ‘top to bottom’. Start with the most important and interesting points and work your way down. If you took away all the paragraphs except the first, the press release should still make sense. This is quite different to most academic writing, where you will

understandably end a piece with your conclusions. For press releases, you should, in effect, think how to turn your writing upside down.

The release should be more than a list of assumptions you make and conclusions you reach. Rather, it should explain the purpose of the research, the framework within which it was carried out, the results and the implications for policy. Use clear and concise English. One of the most effective ways to do this is to imagine that you are explaining your work to someone who isn't familiar with either the technical aspects or 'the literature' of your discipline. They may not know anything about the issue you're examining: how can you get them interested? In addition:

- Begin with a catchy headline and general statement that sums up the main finding, then back it up with some facts and figures.
- Distil into three or four points the essence of your research.
- Back up these points with facts and figures.
- Add a conclusion that outlines the main policy implications or the 'way forward'.
- Above all, keep the language intelligible and jargon-free.

Remember that journalists will not be specialists in your field. When you have finished a first draft of your press release, ask yourself:

- Can I link my findings to a topical event or issue to bring them to life? Most journalists work to tight deadlines and do not have the time to sift through acres of text searching for a hook to hang a story on. This does not mean that you have to sensationalise material to grab the reader's attention or give it a populist slant.
- What are the policy implications?
- Does my research contradict established views?
- How does it affect perceptions outside the academic community?
- Will the reader finish reading and think 'so what?' (If so, you have failed.)

## Organising public meetings

Some research publications may be so potentially newsworthy or relate so directly to current issues of public debate that it is worth holding an event to bring together researchers, journalists and other interested parties. Or there may be a big running story in the news on which your work can shed valuable light: a public event featuring contributions from researchers and other interested parties in government or the private sector may be the ideal way to get your message across.

Such events might include simple gatherings with a handful of key journalists over breakfast, lunch or dinner, more formal press conferences, public discussion meetings for upwards of 100 people drawn from a variety of different communities, smaller more select gatherings of 'opinion formers', or briefings for MPs and peers in Westminster. For all such events, it is worth considering what kind of special publications could be produced: factsheets and press releases before the event; and perhaps reports describing the research and the discussion by 'users' afterwards.

One key to successful events, particularly those laid on specifically for the media, is that they must add value. For example, if you are gathering journalists for a press briefing, it is worth asking what will they get from turning up that they would not have got simply from reading a press release or talking to you by telephone. A free meal or a glass or two of fine wine is one answer, but no matter how good the ancillary benefits, they are never enough. Instead, ask yourself whether the journalist who shows up will get something that the absent competition won't: a different twist on the story, in effect a mini-exclusive, or maybe the opportunity to hear the reactions of people with an interest in the research findings.

The other key to successful events is how the speaker performs. This means being prepared to invest a great deal of time in designing your message to fit your audience. Public events are not academic seminars, so try not to come across as an out-of-touch boffin. Your listeners will want to hear short, entertaining and comprehensible presentations, so:

- Stick very rigidly to your allocated time. Usually ten minutes is more than enough. This means being well organised. And don't say things like 'in the limited time available' or 'how much time do I have?'.
- Be professional. No unreadable slides, whether hand-written, in small type or packed with baffling statistics. No fumbling with papers or making remarks about problems with 'the technology'. In fact, these days almost all presentations should use Powerpoint.
- Avoid jargon, yet try to convey the intellectual excitement of your work.
- Don't waste too much time laying out your assumptions and your data. And don't explain how your work fits into 'the literature'. Your listeners want to know how it fits into their daily concerns.
- State your conclusions clearly. It's a cliché but it makes sense: 'tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, tell 'em it and then tell 'em what you've told 'em'.

You may also want to invite journalists to academic conferences and workshops, perhaps as an inexpensive alternative way of attracting their attention. But be careful: you don't want to alienate journalists by getting them along to very academic sessions where they will feel out of their depth or, worse, bored. Nor do you want them to listen to a research project presented as a proposal or a work-in-progress report rather than as concrete results. And you also need to beware instituting 'Chatham House rules' if you're inviting the media: there's no point the media coming if they can't report what they hear. The overall message is be clear in your invitations to journalists about what it is you're getting them along to. It is generally wise to be selective in whom you invite.

## Going on-line

Everyone has a website these days. But not everyone in the social science research community has thought carefully enough about who are going to be the users of their on-line publishing.

Since most journalists now turn to the Internet as one of their prime sources of information and analysis, acknowledgement of their electronic needs should be a central part of your media strategy. And as the global reach of the Internet expands, its value as a delivery mechanism for research results will only get bigger.

Many research institutions' websites provide an excellent overview of personnel, activities and output. But they often could be updated rather more frequently and made rather more accessible and useful for journalists in terms of directing them to summaries of research and indicating which researchers may be best positioned to help

them with enquiries into particular topics. This might mean simply having a 'press office' button on your home page, linking to your latest press releases and a list of people they can talk to about specific issues.

Or you could make your site much more focused on the non-academic community with new press release headlines and short accessibly written articles as the most prominent features. Interested fellow scholars will be prepared to spend a little time searching for the heavier material that they want; journalists and other visitors will not. You have to make it easy for them.

Posting research findings on the Web in the hope that you'll get on-line media traffic is one thing. But you also need to go directly to the journalists. Many are now very happy to receive press releases by e-mail either instead of or in addition to hard copies sent through the mail. So you can begin to reduce your printing and mailing costs and get your research stories out quicker (though bear in mind that a handful of journalists remain resolutely e-illiterate). There are a few simple principles to bear in mind:

- Send your press release as text in the body of your message without attachments. Some e-mail programmes have problems with attachments no matter how small, and some people may understandably be concerned about computer viruses.
- What you write in the subject line is very important and may influence whether your message is deleted without even being opened. Perhaps use your headline or simply 'New research findings from...'
- You can send just one message to all your electronic media contacts, but make sure you're sending 'blind copies'. You don't want to give away your mailing list or appear to be doing a mass mailing with no personal attention.
- Make sure that you distinguish between on-line editions of newspapers and the newspapers themselves. They are not all one and the same – so journalists at BBC Online, for example, should be circulated in addition to their 'parent'.
- Make sure that any additional material a journalist might request is easily accessible on your website or at least that it can be sent via e-mail, perhaps as an Acrobat file attachment. Increasingly, once your research appears in a newspaper, readers will want to download the full paper, so accessibility is important for them too.

Of course, there are now many publications that are only in on-line form, and it is worth exploring these to see if it is worth sending them your electronic press releases. There are also many, many websites that are desperate for 'content' and will respond favourably to offers of well-written accessible presentations of social science research findings. This is often a valuable alternative publication route to trying to place a feature article in the national newspapers. And on-line, there is no shortage of space.

## Responding to demand...

Much of your media work will be 'supply driven', attempting to 'sell' your findings to potentially interested journalists. But it is also worthwhile focusing on the demand side: in what issues are the media currently interested? What are the news stories of the day and what stories are likely to emerge over the next few weeks and months?

That means keeping on top of what's happening in areas related to your research, whether it is the latest economic and social statistics, government policy initiatives, business and market news, foreign affairs or summit meetings of the European Union, the G7 or other leading global institutions. The proliferation of on-line news and government and business information makes this a relatively easy task these days.

In following the news, you should always ask yourself if you have past research findings that can be used to inform current public debates. These could be simply 'reheated' and issued as press releases or repackaged into new reports. Indeed, for bigger research institutions or programmes seeking a wider public profile, it is a good idea to develop a regular series of publications for an audience beyond academia, repackaging research in a non-technical way, particularly addressing topical issues and perhaps timed to coincide with key political events.

It is also worth considering launching a regular publication summarising the research from your institution, rather like the Centre for Economic Performance does with its publication *Centrepiece*, the Institute for Fiscal Studies does with *IFS Corporate Update* and the Centre for Economic Policy Research does with *European Economic Perspectives*. Publications like these combine demand and supply: some articles present new research and demonstrate its significance, while others take a matter of national debate and point to the perspective and evidence from social science.

Individual researchers too can raise their public profile by engaging with current events and demonstrating how social science research offers insights and potential solutions. For example, you might start writing letters to newspapers or rethink your home page so that relevant material is easily accessible for journalists. Or you might draft non-technical pieces relating research results to public policy questions, which can be posted on your site and perhaps subsequently appear as feature articles in the press. Journalists are always looking for knowledgeable people to comment on current events, and your expertise and your independence are very real assets.

## ... and what to do when you're in demand

Your press releases are beginning to have an impact: stories are appearing and you are starting to get more and more frequent calls from journalists. What do you do now? The first important thing is to recognise that dealing with the media will take up a lot of your time, probably more than you realised when you began your media campaign. The press feed on themselves in many ways, so once your name is out there, you will be more and more in demand. Interest is likely to come in waves: long pauses when you are ignored followed by short periods when you are bombarded with telephone calls and requests for interviews.

Assuming you're happy with that, you need to build and maintain your reputation as a reliable resource, always available to talk and not taking offence when journalists get it wrong (as they sometimes will). That means treating them with respect, always returning a call, never being resentful for the intrusion and, in circumstances where it really is impossible for you to talk or to make a broadcast appearance, finding a colleague who can.

Print journalists typically place fewer time demands on researchers than broadcast journalists. They tend to have clear deadlines, which fall within regular working hours. And for the most part, they're happy to do the work themselves and will only need ten minutes or so of your time to get your angle on a topic.

TV and radio can be very different. Detailed advice on dealing with the broadcast media is covered in an accompanying publication. But there are a few key points that are worth bearing in mind if you want to develop your career as a media don, or indeed to turn your institution into an essential media resource:

- When talking about your own research, follow the same principles as for a press release: convey the key findings first in an accessible way. Particularly for live interviews, decide in advance on the two key points you want to make and try to get them across in your first answer.
- Speak naturally and at the right length, and try to use good turns of phrase that are not just 'soundbites'.

- Be prepared for the difficult questions. Try to think through in advance what you might be asked and plan good answers.
- When invited to discuss a news item, you must be willing to talk at short notice on any relevant issue. Not being prepared to do an early-morning interview will probably end your media career before it begins.
- When discussing a news story, aim to add value to the conventional wisdom, taking the debate on a little bit. Social science will often provide a perspective missing from the public debate. The key is to make your contribution not too mundane but not too technical, not too obvious but not too complex.

Once the media are taking an interest, you will have overcome the frustration of your research being ignored. But you will inevitably face two further frustrations. One is that in a certain number of cases, material you have provided or interviews you have given will not be used because other new stories have taken precedence. The other is that something written about your research contains errors, or oversimplifies or even distorts your findings.

With the former, it is never worth complaining: you simply have to recognise the nature of the news process. With the latter, it is rarely worth complaining, though if you are seriously misrepresented, a careful factual correction or a quiet word with the erring journalist may be appropriate. In neither case will an emotional reaction be at all helpful to your future media career.



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## Media training

An important part of the communications strategy of any organisation is to build the capacity to handle the media across a broad range of staff. This is particularly important for a research organisation, where the people the media really want to talk to are the researchers. So while a press officer can provide a valuable focal point for media relations, it is worth developing researchers' media skills, training them in the best ways to communicate research results on paper, in conversation with journalists and other non-specialists, and in broadcast interviews, whether live or recorded.

The key thing you want to develop in a team of researchers is the ability to communicate with all sorts of groups, not just their peers. It is a highly valuable skill to be able to give the one-minute version of your research findings (for TV or radio) and the ten-minute version (for public presentations and for conversations with journalists), as well as the standard 50-minute version of the academic seminar.

Much of this training can be informal, but it may be worth holding specific media-training workshops to which journalists could be invited to talk through their perspective on research promotion. This has the additional benefit of providing an opportunity for you to present them with your latest outputs. You may also want to invite other academics who have made a name for themselves as media dons and can provide the wisdom of their experiences.

For individual researchers seeking to enhance their media skills, there are courses available, some through the ESRC. Or you can try to teach yourself via 'on-the-job' training. The proliferation of broadcast and on-line media in recent years provides numerous opportunities for researchers wishing to develop their writing and media presentation skills. Writing for a local newspaper or an obscure on-line magazine, for example, will give you your first publication outside the academic world, and a chance to see if you have a taste for writing for a non-specialist audience. Similarly, an interview on a local radio station or a TV programme broadcast in the early hours of the morning to half a dozen people will provide practice in being a talking head. From these beginnings, you can aim to be a regular contributor to the *Financial Times* or the BBC's *Newsnight*.

## Assessing your impact

To begin assessing the impact of your media strategy, it is essential to track coverage of the research that has been promoted. For print publications, this can be done relatively easily, if rather expensively, through subscription to a clippings service like Durrants. An alternative but very time-consuming approach is to monitor it yourself by subscribing to the publications that you are principally targeting. Increasingly too, there are online services like the Financial Times' archive ([www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com)) that allow you to search a range of publications for any mentions of your work.

Monitoring broadcast media is clearly much more difficult, though it is going to be much more likely that they will want to talk to you if they are using your research story. A print publication may simply take your press release and run it without your knowledge, whereas a radio station or television programme will usually require someone to interview. In most cases, it is quite acceptable for you to request a copy of the interview for your records.

Beyond simply keeping track of coverage, you'll begin to feel the impact of your efforts through further requests for advice or interviews from the media. The number of hits on your website will also increase as journalists and other interested parties follow up mentions of your research in a newspaper. Once you have begun to get a name for yourself as someone willing to step outside of academic life and contribute insights to the national debate, the attention you receive will soar.

Further down the road as your media profile grows, there may be offers of consultancy work from the private or public sector, requests for you to speak at non-academic conferences, even invitations to advise Cabinet ministers. You will have a far greater opportunity to influence policy and public opinion and to promote the brand of your university and the public image of your discipline, as well as being able to enjoy extra financial rewards. The potential payoffs from raising your public profile through the media are numerous.