Working with the Media

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What This Tutorial Covers

- The culture of science journalism
- The constraints journalists face when covering science news
- Guidelines for working with media

Communicating with Journalists

- From time to time, scientists may be called to work with the media, such as
  - When providing information or expertise related to a current event or situation.
  - When offering insight or background into new research.
- Understanding a bit about the culture and constraints of science journalism may help scientists prepare.

Scientists and Journalists: Why Is It So Difficult to Communicate?

- Nelkin (1986) found that scientists and journalists…
  - Differ in regard to what is viewed as newsworthy
    - Once scientific reports have been carefully peer reviewed, scientists consider them credible and newsworthy.
    - To journalists, these certified ideas are “old news.”
  - Differ in regard to who is viewed as credible
    - Journalists will often rely on opinions of well-known figures in science, who may not have expertise in a given area.
    - Scientists view such use as suspicious and unprofessional.
  - Differ in regard to what’s fit to print
    - Journalists often omit some background that scientists deem as necessary to understand the research.
    - Journalists may make science more personalized whereas scientists favor a more objective viewpoint.

Why Is It So Difficult to Communicate, cont'd.

- Scientists and journalists…
  - Differ in regard to covering conflict
    - Journalists tend to create polarities when covering disputes.
    - Scientists see that it's more important to understand the veracity of the claims than balancing opposing points of view.
  - Differ in their use of language
    - Journalists prefer more colorful language.
    - Scientists prefer more precise language.
  - Differ in their view of the role of the press
    - Scientists see journalists as pipelines for transmitting science to the public and hope to control this flow.
    - Journalists view their role as delving more deeply into the effects of science on people and public policy (Nelkin, 1986).

Constraints on Science Journalists

- When communicating with the media, it can be helpful to understand some of the culture of science journalism.
  - In her benchmark study of science journalism, Nelkin (1987) describes several constraints science journalists may face.
    - Newswork constraints
      - Competition for stories
        - » There is a focus on “breaking news” in the newsroom.
      - Limited time to prepare stories
        - » They must meet deadlines.
      - Limited budgets for research
        - » Many news media outlets can’t afford to employ full-time science writers, who have training and expertise in science or technology.
        - » Journalists may also lack travel money to conduct research.
      - Competition for story space
        - » There may be little room for science stories.

Constraints on Science Journalists, cont'd.

- Some additional constraints include (Nelkin, 1987):
  - Editorial constraints
    - Editors have the final say over the story, its position, its headline, its content.
  - Assumptions about their audiences
    - The way stories are written reflects certain beliefs about what audiences want to read
      - There is a focus on drama and human interest; complex issues tend to be avoided.
  - Economic pressures
    - Stories must attract readers so that a news source can attract advertisers.
    - Economic stakes may influence coverage.
  - The topic's complexity
    - They may have difficulty translating complex, technical language into language that lay audiences can understand.

Guidelines for Working with the Media

- Here are some general tips for working with media (see Miller, 1986).
  - The Interview
    - Consider in advance what you want and don't want to communicate to help you control the interview.
    - Explain things simply and in non-technical, everyday language. The less translation the journalist has to do, the less the room for error exists.
    - Confirm with the journalist that "off-the-record" comments will not be published.
    - Provide the journalist with a written statement summarizing the topic. Ideally, this summary should follow newspaper style, with the main point in the first paragraph, followed by elaboration in succeeding paragraphs.

Guidelines, cont'd.

- Interview tips, cont'd.
  - Try to point out the meaning and implications of your research, but encourage reporters not to write sensational or misleading headlines.
  - Be as brief as possible in your answers, but avoid ambiguity.
  - Since editors may have to cut some of the story to accommodate last-minute news, avoid making statements that may be ambiguous if subsequent qualifying information is cut.
  - Because reporters are trying to meet deadlines, return phone calls as quickly as possible. Calling back a day or two later may be too late.
  - Ask the reporter if you can check the accuracy of direct quotes or statements attributed to you. When the deadline is too short for you to check, or if the reporter does not agree to let you check, proceed cautiously in your statements.

Guidelines cont'd.

- Interview tips, cont'd.
  - Before committing to an interview, consider the credentials of the media organization and the journalist (e.g., do they specialize in sensational headlines or exaggerated claims?).
  - Learn who the reliable journalists are in your area (topic and geographic). When possible, build good working relationships with them.
  - Remember: To avoid being criticized by colleagues, the press is not a place for announcing research findings that have not been peer reviewed.
  - When relevant, scientists should give credit to antecedents or refer to similar research being done in the field. This helps remind journalists that science is conducted in a context.

Guidelines, cont'd.

- Tips for TV in particular:
  - As TV focuses on images, use your imagination to consider various ways of visually telling your story. What are some important camera shots to illustrate your points that you might suggest?
  - Inquire with the reporter whether it would be useful to have a written summary of your research prior to the interview.
  - If the interview is live, consider reviewing difficult material with the interviewer first, if there is time.
  - Look at the reporter, not the camera.
  - Ask the reporter whether you can receive a completed copy of the tape, or your part in it, for your files.

Guidelines, cont'd.

- Tips for radio in particular:
  - As radio focuses on sound, consider whether there are any background noises or sounds that would be helpful to illustrate your topic.

Guidelines, cont'd.

- Tips for newsprint in particular:
  - Remember that different news outlets have different audiences and interests.
    - Most newspaper stories are event-oriented. When possible, consider supplying the reporter with a news release to alert about an event or publication.
    - Newspapers also contain feature stories, in which reporters have more time and space to investigate a subject in depth.
  - Remember that your story may get picked up by a wire service (e.g., AP, UPI) and published across the country. Don't forget that what you say to the small town newspaper could ultimately appear on the front page of the *New York Times.*

References

- Miller, N. (1986). The scientist's responsibility for public information: A guide to effective communication with the media. In S. Friedman, S. Dunwoody, & C. Rogers (Eds.) *Scientists and journalists: Reporting science as news* (pp. 239-253).Washington DC: AAAS.
- Nelkin, D. (1987). *Selling science: How the press covers science and technology*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.