

Your Research in the Headlines: Dealing With the Media

By
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When interacting with journalists "there are a lot of things that can go wrong, but in the end it seems to work." --Hans Peter Peters.

Final-year Ph.D. student Molly Crockett got more than she bargained for when her first-author [paper](#) was published in *Science* last June. Her university circulated an embargoed press release about a week before publication, and within a couple of hours, "I started getting tons of e-mails and phone calls" from journalists, Crockett says. All told, she appeared in four radio or podcast interviews, a dozen newspaper stories, and five magazine articles. "The week the research went out [was] pretty much devoted 9 to 5 to dealing with the press," she says. It was "crazy." Crockett received some coaching from her supervisor and feels she prepared for her interviews fairly well. Still, entering the limelight was "a sink-or-swim learning experience." That hardly makes her unique; few scientists have the luxury of training before they confront the media for the first time. Yet an understanding of how the media work, an awareness of what could go wrong, and a bit of preparation can help you deal with a sudden tide of media interest and ensure that your scientific work is disseminated accurately to the public.

Why should I agree to an interview?

Talking to the media is a fairly common experience among scientists. In a recent [survey](#) of epidemiologists and stem cell researchers in the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France, nearly two-thirds said that they had been interviewed at least once in the past 3 years. Almost all did so, they said, to help educate the general public and to promote a more positive attitude toward research.



(Lucas Laursen)

Molly Crockett

But there were other incentives for talking to the media. Almost half the surveyed scientists felt the exposure had helped them advance their careers, compared with 3% who found it damaging. Four out of 10 of the surveyed scientists also expected their media appearances to enhance peer recognition. "Being in the media goes hand in hand with being published. ... I got invited to conferences as a direct result of this paper," says Crockett, a Gates Scholar at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom.

Interacting with the media may also be a good opportunity to look at your science through a different lens. "It's great to be forced to consider the broader implications of your research at an early stage," Crockett says. A broader perspective may help you generate new ideas or convince funding bodies of the worthiness of your research.

What could go wrong?

Talking to journalists is not risk-free, however. In the same study, Hans Peter Peters, a communication researcher at [Forschungszentrum Jülich](#) in Germany, and his colleagues found that about 40% of researchers were concerned about critical reactions from peers resulting from their media involvement. Usually, "researchers recognize the need for publicity for their own research field," but depending on the situation, interacting with the media can also be looked upon badly, Peters says.

If you're not careful, your expertise could be used for topics you'd rather not be associated with. Some time ago, "a tabloid journalist called an astronomer at the Max Planck Institute. He wanted to know when Venus, Mercury, and Saturn would be especially close to each other. ... The next morning, the name of the scientist could be found in the same breath as recommendations regarding the best time to have sex according to the planets," says [Diane Scherzler](#), who gives media training courses for academics and is an editor in the online department of *Suedwestrundfunk*, a German public broadcasting company. Before agreeing to an interview, "it is very important to make clear with whom I am talking, what is this journalist working on, what kind of story, for which magazine or program," Peters adds.



(Gunter Ullman)

Diane Scherzler

A one-off interview with a tabloid or local newspaper may be easier to turn down than requests from a horde of major newspapers and TV stations. The risk, of course, is that if you choose not to tell the story of your science, someone else will--and will do it poorly. Whomever you talk to, "if the scientist doesn't trust the journalist or is not happy about the direction in which his questions are going, then it is better to stop the conversation," Scherzler says.

There's a chance, of course, that journalists won't represent your research accurately, and this concerns many scientists. Nine out of 10 researchers Peters surveyed worried about being misquoted, and eight out of 10 thought journalists were unpredictable. In Crockett's experience, "popular press' takes on the paper [can be] quite far removed from what the research presented," she says. In her *Science* paper, Crockett and her colleagues found that healthy people are more prone to retaliate to unfairness when their brain serotonin levels are reduced through diet. In some accounts, the coverage "somehow inferred that we should eat more chocolate so we can be nicer to each other," Crockett says.

Indeed, scientists frequently complain about mistakes and inaccuracies. "Scientists regard different things as being incorrect: firstly, the fact that particular aspects are omitted; secondly, simplifications; and thirdly, actual errors," Scherzler says. Scientists need to understand that communicating science to the public is very different from communicating it to one's scientific peers. "Omissions are ... always necessary in journalism, because space or airtime is restricted. Simplifications are also inevitable so that the audience can follow the topic. Errors are, of course, annoying," she adds.

And there's much a researcher can do to reduce the number of errors. "The quality of an article does ... not only depend on the skills of the journalist but also on the source," Scherzler continues. "One should, therefore, do everything in one's power to ensure that the journalist understands what one is trying to communicate and that he has received all the information required for a good article."

Preparing for good media interactions

Some journalists will send you interview questions in advance, but if they don't, try to anticipate them. Knowing in advance what you want to convey will help you to react to questions and to take an active part in shaping your media appearance, Scherzler says.

"The main thing that I was asked [for] was a short summary of the research that is understandable to everyone: ... What you did, what you found, and what it means," Crockett says. Part of the job of a journalist is to explain to members of the general public how science will affect them. So "expect questions that do not focus on the research itself but on the implications and social context," Peters adds. Because such implications are vague or hard to predict, and because part of journalists' job is also to grab readers' attention, this is one area in which journalists often make mistakes. Stick to the facts and don't hesitate to put the journalist straight if he or she misinterprets or overstates the importance of your research, Crockett says.



(Forschungszentrum Jülich)

Hans Peter Peters

Restrict yourself to a few take-home messages. Generally, journalists don't "know what's really the important and ... the not-so-important information. So a scientist shouldn't bombard them with facts but instead try to concentrate on the quintessential points of his or her statement," Scherzler says.

It's not just substance; the challenges are also rhetorical. Try to picture yourself explaining your science to a friend or family member who is not a scientist. "A first basic skill is to understand that you need to recontextualize what you are doing in other ways, using metaphors, using analogies, and ... try to explain this with a language that other people ... can understand," says Vladimir de Semir, science journalist and director of the [Science Communication Observatory](#) at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain. Know who is the public you are trying to reach and accept some concessions. Try to find a compromise in representing the research that is acceptable to the scientist and useful for the media, Peters says.

After the interview, make yourself available for further inquiries the journalist may have, Scherzler says. There's nothing wrong with asking if you can review and comment on quotes and technical passages--but don't expect a journalist to comply with every request. Showing the article to interviewees violates the editorial policy of some publications. "You have to respect [this]," Peters says. Accept that "journalists insist on being independent, on ... making their own judgment. They ... are the author of the article and program and not the scientist," Peters says.

Getting your message across takes practice--and training. An increasing number of research centers, professional societies, and funding bodies offer media training courses for scientists (see box). Also, "every scientist can get a feel for what is necessary to produce good scientific articles in the media" by reading the popular media regularly, Scherzler adds.

When interacting with journalists, "there are a lot of things that can go wrong, but in the end it seems to work," says Peters. In his survey, 57% of the researchers said they were generally pleased about their latest media appearances, and only 6% were dissatisfied. "On the whole, it's good for young scientists to get your name out there," Crockett says. There are some risks, but Crockett puts them in perspective. "I think other scientists who have been through the process understand that something gets lost in translation, and if some journalist somewhere misquotes me or represents my research inaccurately, they won't hold me responsible because they know how it works," she says. Do everything you can so the journalist gets it right, but accept that some of it is out of your hands, she adds.

"In general, ... the scientist should not regard the journalist as an enemy. Such a distrustful attitude drains a lot of the scientist's energy that would better be spent on a good interview. Working with the mass media should be seen as an opportunity and not a hazard," Scherzler says.