Science Societies

An early career perspective of the societies' media-training workshop

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Knowing how to effectively engage with media to increase public outreach helps extend the excitement of research and innovation to those outside the silos of science and academia. Photo by Ashley Spratt/USFWS.

I would be lying if I claimed to seek out media interviews to “step into the limelight” and convey the practical implications of my research to the general public. Don’t get me wrong, as an early career scientist working in agricultural extension, I interact with the public all the time, but it is the public that I am most familiar with, my stakeholder groups. These are the farmers and landowners working to sustain agricultural productivity, and we share a common language. Our communication is a familiar two-way street—I know them, and they know me. But when it comes to thinking about stepping outside the familiarity of stakeholder groups to have a similar conversation with news media outlets, I suddenly become less comfortable. However, it is possible to overcome discomfort with media interviews by understanding the way the news media works and developing a compelling, clear, and concise message that directly answers the questions of the general public. Building positive media relations takes work—it is difficult to remove stakeholder-specific jargon that seems to have permeated your subconscious[1] but the payoff is better public understanding of the research, technologies, and innovations that affect our natural resources and agricultural productivity.

Public Outreach: Start Early in Your Career

Scientists engage in public outreach by transferring knowledge from the scientific community to the public. Effective public outreach clearly communicates the value of natural resources to rural and urban communities, which strengthens environmental literacy and drives support for publicly funded scientific research and development. Engaging with media to increase public outreach may not be on everyone’s mind, especially early in one’s career when publishing in journals to communicate within the scientific community is prioritized. However, learning to effectively navigate media

interviews and craft a message that connects just as clearly with a broader public audience should be a career-long goal that is consistently revisited.

The Societies have launched an effort to familiarize members with the process of working with the media (Fisk, **2020**). The goal is to prepare members for public outreach by discussing how journalists typically conduct interviews, trading tips for handling a difficult interview situation, and exploring techniques to limit the possibility of being caught off guard or misunderstood during an interview. Presenting the most compelling solutions to research questions first, rather than burying the lede, and then discussing specific results and benefits can increase the impact (i.e., public interest) of an interview. Additionally, understanding a news outlet's audience is one way to anticipate the interviewer's questions and be ready to provide thoughtful, appropriate answers to address that audience's needs or concerns (Fisk & Finco, **2019**; Fisk & Finco, **2020**).

Media 101 Workshop

The most recent media training offered by the Societies, "Media 101," was conducted as a two-day online workshop held on 19 and 20 May 2021. Participants were divided into two groups with each group attending a two-hour seminar session on the first day and a one-hour practice session on the second day. Within these small groups, participants in the seminar learned about the news cycle and how to distinguish different types of news media, discussed previous experiences with news journalists, and exchanged feedback on interview techniques and habits. The second day of the workshop provided an opportunity to practice some of the newly learned techniques during a mock interview intended to simulate an in-person interview with a journalist from a popular media outlet. During the interview, participants had two minutes to provide an answer to a pre-arranged question after which the interviewer asked two

questions, the first was a direct follow-up, and the second was intended to be slightly confrontational or intentionally misguided. The total time for the interview was limited to five minutes to keep participants focused on developing a concise, jargon-free message. However, the tendency to fall back on jargon or stakeholder-specific language is strong, so participants were encouraged to swap in common analogies that conveyed the same concepts. These techniques help breakthrough communication barriers between the scientific community and the general public. The practice session of this workshop provided a unique opportunity to use the diverse perspectives of small groups to recognize when an “interviewee’s” jargony blind spots were preventing clear science communication.

The early phase of one’s career can be an exciting and greatly productive time. Knowing how to effectively engage with media to increase public outreach helps extend the excitement of research and innovation to those outside the silos of science and academia. Public outreach can also strengthen communities with solutions derived from agricultural research, increase science advocacy, and stimulate greater interest in students to pursue a career in the agricultural and environmental sciences. Please look for upcoming opportunities to attend the Media 101 workshop sponsored by the Societies.

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innovation to those outside the silos of science and academia. ”

Dig Deeper

- Fisk, S.V. (2020). Science and positive media relations: first workshop held in San Antonio. *CSA News*, 65(3), 26–27. https://doi.org/10.1002/csan.20057

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- Fisk, S., & Finco, S. (2019). Making it work when working with the media: part 1. *CSA News*, **64**(12), 26–29. https://doi.org/10.2134/csa2019.64.1217

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