Science Societies

Making it work when working with the media: Part 2

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Last issue, we covered the basics of a journalist's job, life in the newsroom, and the anatomy of a news story (**https://doi.org/10.2134/csa2019.64.1217**). This issue, we cover answering questions to gain more control over an interview.

Handling Questions You Can't Answer

Most interviews are not live, which means you have an opportunity to say, “I'm unsure about that—how would you like me to get back to you?” There is nothing wrong with not knowing something if the journalist goes astray. In addition, they could be poorly wording their question. The problem could be solved by merely asking, “Could you rephrase that—I'm not sure what you mean.”

Use this “A-B-C” tactic for great answers:

Acknowledge and Answer

- What I hear you saying…
- Are you asking…
- If I understand you correctly…
- First, let me say…
- That's a great question…
- Is what you're asking…
- I understand your concern…

Bullet and Bridge

Separate parts of the question asked. This can also help you distinguish multiple points in your answer.

- There are three key points I hope to get across. The first is…the second is…and the third is…
- There are a few things that I'd like to share with you…the first is…
- There are several key issues. The first issue is…the second issue is…the third issue is…

Bridging techniques can help you reposition answers to questions that are not relevant, negative, out of line, or simply incorrect:

- From the research that's been done…
- Let me answer that point by point…
- I have a different viewpoint…
- The question really is…
- I would put it this way…
- More importantly…
- The bigger concern to me is…

Complete Your Answer

Complete ***your*** answer with the main message and key points. This will help firm up the message you want to make and flag your answer as the most important ingredient.

- The bottom line is…
- The thing everyone should remember…
- Once again…
- Our success depends upon…

Don't Engage in Arguments or Speculation

Rarely—but highly publicized when it happens—a journalist may try to trap you. No need to participate. For example, one high-profile person has certain rules about what

questions they'll answer, and all interviewers sign agreements not to go into this territory. When one interviewer would not stop asking the question, after our high-profile person was respectfully saying, “You know I don't speak on that topic”—she politely got up from her chair, turned off the microphone, handed it to a stagehand, and walked away. All this was filmed and aired live. The headline that the station tried to use? “High-Profile Person Storms Off Stage.” I applaud this person—and respect their anonymity. I don't think this will happen to you at all. Stay calm and keep saying, “I don't know the answer to that question.”

I'm sorry I can't answer that because…

- I don't have the specifics on that…
- It's in the development stages…
- The study is in the very early stages…
- I haven't seen that study…
- I don't want to speculate….
- It doesn't have anything to do with the subject at hand…
- It's proprietary information….
- It hasn't been part of my area of study…

A Little Etiquette Can Go a Long Way

Journalists—and the public—are not uneducated. They may not know what you know, or they may be misinformed, but they likely have some area of expertise. Let's give them the benefit of the doubt and inform, share, and learn from them.

Another area to avoid is putting down a study or the authors/researchers. It's fine to say you “disagree” with a published paper, the study design, etc. But your disagreement itself isn't news, so it shouldn't be the focus of your precious time trying

to inform a journalist.

Realize **everything** you say is “on the record,” even pre- and post-interview small talk. You don't want to be taken out of context or give them ideas for another story; you're trying to develop positive relationships that are important to the long-term health of your research and communications about it.

And never roll your eyes, no matter how much you disagree.

During the Interview

Be clear, brief, and positive. If this is visual media or radio, remember to emphasize key points or words with your voice. Pause occasionally to allow your listeners to keep up with your talking points and consider these tips:

- Pause before answering a question—think about your key messages and how they relate to the question at hand.
- Keep your answers brief; they're less likely to be edited down if you are brief and to the point.
- Separate multiple-part questions. That gives you the opportunity to provide a brief answer to each question. Oftentimes, if you try tackling multiple-part questions in one answer, you'll wind up rambling or missing important points.
- If you're interrupted, go back to your original answer and messaging.
- While messaging is important, don't “hide behind it” to avoid answering pointed questions.
- Put answers in your own words—don't let the reporter make them up for you.
- Be aware that you may be asked the same thing multiple times, in different ways. This might imply that your first take at answering this question wasn't quite clear enough or maybe the answer was too long.
- Limit nodding head as this can be distracting—but do smile.

- Keep eye contact with the reporter if your interview is in person.
- Lean slightly forward if you are sitting because **body language matters**.
- Place your hands at your side or lightly touching at waist level if you are standing but not in your pockets, clasped in back, with arms crossed. Gesture naturally.
- **Stop** answering the question when you are finished.

If your interview is for visual media, there are a few “dressing” tips:

- Avoid clothing in white, black, and big patterns—all are bad contrasts for video.
- Focus your clothing on plain, medium colors or jewel tones.
- Don't wear big jewelry. It reflects light and make noises on a microphone
- The bottom line on the “what to wear” question: You want people to hear what you're saying, not stare at what you're wearing.

Differences in Media Genres

Television and streaming news services tell visual stories. Sometimes they just do “talking head” interviews, but photos of your research or that help answer questions within the story often are appreciated. Most stories have sustained action, so visuals like folks working in your lab, you walking along the hallway with a reporter, etc., are all something to be prepared for. They will call this “b-roll” and the actual interview the “a-roll.” Stories can run from 30 seconds to a few minutes, depending on the day's priorities. Television often needs you to be ready on short notice, and even if it's traditional TV, the story can still be streamed or put into print.

Radio often tells very short stories. They are often able to do interviews on the phone. Since radio is a form of oral communication, they often like “natural sounds” as their version of b-roll. So, if a reporter comes to your lab, don't be surprised if they want equipment running softly in the background. Alternatively, their sound equipment is

especially precise, so if background noise is too distracting, you may have to turn off some equipment or move to a quieter location. Podcasts are usually a more relaxed, extended version of radio style.

Print or online written-word media vary widely. Both newspapers and magazines have moved to a combination of "feature" stories—longer and more in depth—and short articles. All appreciate photos that fit with the story topic (for more on taking good photos, see **https://doi.org/10.2134/csa2018.63.0118**). They may ask for follow-up interviews unlike television and radio formats, which are usually a one-time interaction.

Remember to read all our collected *CSA News* magazine articles about good communications habits in our Communications Toolkits.**1** And if you missed it, read Part 1 of our media relations series found in the last issue of *CSA News* magazine (**https://doi.org/10.2134/csa2019.64.1217**).

Citing Literature

Anthony Fulford, An Early Career Perspective of the Societies' Media Training Workshop, CSA News, 10.1002/csan.20570, **66**, 9, (54-55), (2021)

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