How do I become ‘media savvy’?

We all base many of our everyday decisions on what we hear or see in the mass media, which for the majority of the population has become the only source of scientific information. The scientific community therefore can no longer afford to dismiss its importance.

Despite this, however, many young scientists complete their studies and embark on a career in research without any training in public speaking, interviewing or popular writing. It is not surprising, then, that scientists often shy away from media interviews and public platforms.

"South African scientists are very creative and innovative in their work," says Christina Scott, science reporter at the SABC, South Africa's public broadcasting company. “They are often highly respected by their peers abroad. But, they have absolutely no idea how to communicate to a non-scientific audience."

For many, the relationship between scientists and journalists remains difficult, sometimes even hostile. There are complaints on both sides - scientists doubt the ability of journalists to report accurately and responsibly on their work, while journalists complain that scientists are bad communicators, hiding behind jargon.

Overcoming the "us and them" dynamic therefore requires commitment from both parties. However, once achieved, a relationship based on mutual trust will benefit society in general. Also, at times in a scientist’s career, it can be extremely important, perhaps even critical, to have a good relationship with a few key journalists. “Communication is an essential aspect of your work,” says Sandy Dacombe, an award-winning science writer based in Malawi. “Take it seriously.”

Why should I care about getting media coverage of my research?

If you are not convinced that communicating with the public is your responsibility and in your own best interest, consider the following:

- Science enriches human life and can improve the lives of many people. Public taxes pay for most scientific projects and therefore the people have a right to know. Communicating about science has become part of the ethical and professional responsibility of scientists.
- In a democratic society, the public should have a say about science, and should be enabled to make rational personal choices about scientific issues. But to do so, the people need to be properly informed in an unpatronising manner. Once this has been achieved, the way is open to a two-way dialogue with the public, one of the more ambitious aims of science communication.
- Scientists who use the media effectively see significant advantages in having a media presence for themselves, their projects, and their research organisations. It is regarded as an imperfect, but powerful method for reaching end users, research funders, bureaucrats, and other scientists.[1]
- Scientists read newspapers too. For example, *The New England Journal of Medicine* carried out a survey of its articles that had been covered in the *New York Times* and found that papers that did get media coverage had 70% more citations that those that didn't.[2]
- Remember, you are not communicating to the media, you are using them to communicate with a variety of audiences.

Strategies for working with the media

The stage of the research, and the type of story, demand different media strategies. Working successfully with the media takes time, practice and a willingness to understand how journalists work and what they need. To get started, here are some simple guidelines and practical tips that will help you in the long-term process of achieving constructive and mutually beneficial collaboration with the media.

Just say "yes!" and make it personal

Many journalists complain that they have difficulty simply getting a scientist to agree to an interview in the first place. When a journalist contacts you, it is usually you that they want to speak to, not your head of department, not your partner, not your assistant and definitely not a whole team. The journalist wants to interview the scientist who actually did the work - the one who was in the bush, lab, water or wherever the research was done.

Remember, science is about things, but science news is about people. So, when you tell your story, make it personal and convey your feelings about it. That way, your inherent excitement will come through naturally. Journalists don't need to speak to the team leader or the world expert in you; they just want you to explain something to ordinary people. So don't be condescending in your approach, or pretend that you are too busy; speak to them.

When is it news?

If it is the first, oldest, biggest, smallest -- any of those superlatives -- it can make what journalists call a 'hard' news story. But too often this information is hidden in a news release. Make it easy for the news editor or journalist to spot about the heart of the story by lifting it out for them. Hundreds of stories pass across the desk of a reporter (or news editor) every day. They have only a few seconds to consider yours before passing rapidly on to the next one. So make sure that your most important point gets to them quickly.

It really is now or never

Journalists work to incredibly tight deadlines. The nature of journalism demands that they juggle several stories at the same time, and can seldom wait to phone you back the next day, or even an hour later. You must be willing to give priority to a media interview, and to drop other commitments if necessary. Remember that you're not doing the journalist a favour; you are using the media as a tool to reach thousands of readers, listeners or viewers. See it as an opportunity, not an intrusion.

The competition is tough!

Getting science stories into the mass media is no easy task. In many countries, editors are often locked into believing that newsworthy items can only be disasters, politics or sport. Faced with such obstacles, the only way to get your science story covered is often to 'spin it', highlighting an angle of relevance and excitement that will grab and hold the attention of the reporter, his or her editor, and the sub-editor who will be responsible for seeing it into print.

Prepare! Practice!

It takes time to come up with an interesting angle to your scientific story. The abstract of your scientific paper is not going to do the trick! Before you take the initiative to contact a journalist, or return their call, think carefully about the story you want to tell and how you can make it come alive. Think about comparisons, analogies and metaphors that will help explain your work.

If you are going to do a prepared interview, get a friend -- not another scientist -- to listen to your story. Other essential aspects of preparing for a media interview include finding out information about the specific programme or newspaper, and also checking in advance how the interview will be conducted.

You can be in control

If you are prepared and enthusiastic about your topic, and clear in your own mind about what you want to get across, you can keep the interview on course. Don't stray into irrelevant areas, and don't be a slave to irrelevant questions.

Make sure that you stick to the main points that you want to get across. Before the interview, it may help to jot these down on a piece of paper. This will help you remember what you wanted to say, and keeping to the salient points could help the journalist to report the story accurately. If you get distracted and sidetracked, it increases the chances are that the journalist will lose interest, or write a totally different story.

Focus on the angle and messages you want to get across. Make sure you have the relevant supporting information and visuals on hand. Focus on what you have found – remember, the method of your research is only interesting to the journalist (and the reader) if it involves something really unusual. Also, give the journalist your business card to make sure they get your name, institution and department right.

Everything is on record

Many journalists will honour an "off the record" statement – providing that you have said this before, and not after, the statement in question, and ensure that the journalists has accepted it.

However some may fail to respect such commitment; if you are uncertain, or have reasons not to trust the journalist in question, you should proceed on the basis that as soon as you sit down for an interview, or pick up the phone, every word you say is on the record. Do not put yourself into a situation where you later have reason to regret anything you have said in an interview.

Keep it short

For a specific interview, choose three to four main points that you would like to get across. This is not the time to attempt to explain the entire spectrum of your research. You can use different angles on what you do for different interviews. But each article or interview has to be short and focused.

Look them in the eye

Keep eye contact with a television reporter throughout the interview. If others ask a question – for example, when you are the member of a panel -- look at them too. Don't look up -- or down -- for inspiration. Looking from side to side will make you look shifty. Finally, an obvious, but sometimes overlooked point: don't wear sunglasses on TV.

A picture is still worth a thousand words

Striking images virtually guarantee good media coverage. Television thrives on action, movement and noise. In a newspaper, an unusual full-colour photograph with a caption will grab more readers than stories that use text alone, no matter how interesting. If you have images in different formats -- print, film, video and electronic versions-- that is even better for you. For radio interviews, you have to "speak in pictures" to help the listener visualise what you are describing.

Keep it simple, exciting and relevant

Journalists have to report complex issues to lay audiences, and they need your help. If you are being interviewed on radio or television, it is likely that the viewers or listeners are busy with several other things while listening to you. You have to seduce them into paying attention to what you are saying. Finding the right words is part of the trick; when asked to describe coronal mass ejections that disrupt magnetic fields, John Dudeny of the British Antarctic Survey said, "Well, it's a bit like the sun belching".

"Scientists often find it difficult to speak simple language because they're so immersed in their own jargon, Jeanne Viall, a feature writer for the South African newspaper the *Cape Argus* explains. “So please be willing to explain, explain, explain," She continues: "As a journalist working for a newspaper I know my audience, and I know that if I'm not clear about a concept or issue, neither will they be. My job is to take sometimes difficult ideas and present them clearly."

Sometimes it is hard to step back and simplify your work. “Pretend you are speaking to a bright nine-year old child. Make it interesting, varied and easy to grasp. Stick to broad overviews, avoid painstaking detail,” is the advice from writer Sandy Dacombe. “The journalist has limited time and need[s] clean, clear facts to build their story.”

Tell them why it is "cool"

When you are interviewed as a scientist, you are representing not only your discipline but the entire field of science. For those few seconds, it is your responsibility to not only tell your story, but also to present science as something worthwhile, exciting, interesting and inspiring.

Use visual language and imagery to fire up the imaginations of your audience. An energetic and enthusiastic interviewee will quickly win over not only his/her audience, but also the journalist doing the interview. This is your opportunity to show that science is worth investing in, and that it offers great career possibilities.

It's a lot to fit into twenty seconds, that's why it takes some practice. Show some passion and learn to use short, punchy statements.

Use the news hooks of the day

If an issue or topic is already in the press, that's a good time to seize the opportunity and immediately contact the media if you are doing research that is relevant (even remotely) to the news of the day.

Get to know and understand the media, and respect the journalist

Talk to journalists about their work to get an understanding of the constraints under which they operate. These include tight deadlines, the need for simplicity and speed, the influence of sub-editors on the final story, and the role of editors in deciding whether the story makes it at all.

All this will help you to anticipate some of their needs and approaches, and to build a better relationship with individual reporters. You know your subject, but the journalist knows the audience – you have to find common ground and respect each other's expertise.

Beware of statistics

Too many numbers, or numbers that are difficult to comprehend, doesn't further your cause. Your chances of being misquoted increase dramatically once you start giving complicated statistical or numeric information. And remember that even if the journalist gets the numbers right, his or her readers or audience may still have difficulty interpreting the data. So try to explain ‘around’ the numbers if you can. Say "one out of four people" instead of "25% of the population", or even “most” rather than “the majority of”. Use comparisons to explain how small, big or rare something is.

Follow up, but think twice before asking to see the final article

You have the right to ask to check the facts once a story has been written; not all journalists will agree to do so, but the more responsible ones will realise that it is in their interests, as well as yours, to ensure that the facts are correct.

You may also ask to see the full article, although it is up to the journalist to decide whether to show it to you. Some journalists hate being asked to send an article to a person who has been interviews prior to publication, because they know from experience that scientists (and others) often want to change more than the facts.

They may refuse and probably, will not interview you again if you protest too vigorously. Rather, ask them to read back any facts and figures to you so that you can check accuracy. Also, offer to make yourself available for any follow-up questions the reporter may have while finalising the article or while editing the broadcast segment.

If the journalist agrees to send you the article prior to publication, you can complain if you feel that you have been misquoted, but you *must* resist the temptation to interfere with their interpretation, opinion or style. It might be worth remembering that the journalist may be interviewing several people about a specific issue or topic, and your view is just one side to their story.

Think of the broader picture and impact

It is best to learn to live with minor differences of interpretation, as long as the essence of the story is correct. Don't look at the story only from your own, narrow perspective; rather try to judge its general impact on the audience you are trying to reach. Scientists with very little experience of the media tend to distrust them because they think the media trivialises and distorts science. But they often base this judgement on harsh critical scrutiny that can lose sight of the broader message that the journalist is seeking to get across.

Some more tips

- For radio or TV, don’t use phrases like "as I said earlier"; that piece may well have been edited out.
- Many acronyms and jargon will sabotage your efforts, and the resulting interview will probably be dumped.

If you use a scientific term, try to explain it immediately as simply as possible.

Never correct a presenter on air - you are not speaking to a student. You can diplomatically work the correct information into your response.

If you plan to host a press conference or invite a journalist for an interview, schedule it for the morning. Journalists, particularly those working on daily newspapers, tend to *gather* information the mornings and *write* in the afternoons. If you don't want anyone to turn up, schedule your event for late afternoon.

Less is more. Journalists deal in information – preferably information their competitors don't know about. Don't be dismayed if you can get only one journalist interested in a story. Others are bound to call once you're the appeared in the media as an 'exclusive'.

Read, listen & watch

Research the media – read newspapers, watch television, listen to the radio. Decide then which branch of the media is best suited to carry your specific message. Do more research. Find out which journalist is most in sympathy with your way of thinking. Get to know a journalist through his/her work - that way you will be able to target your story according to his/her audience and style.

You'll get better at it

Very few scientists are born communicators. But you can and will get better at it the more you do it. Media training and attending courses in communication and presentation skills could make all the difference.

At times in your career, it can be extremely important, even critical, to have a good relationship with a few key journalists. Once you have established yourself as a credible and interesting source of information, you can expect more calls from the media.

"I have a list of experts in different fields that I will phone over and over again, because I know they give the kind of comment that I can use in my newspaper," says Laurice Taitz, science writer for the South African *Sunday Times*. "They understand what I need to make a story work for our readers."

Getting help on the Internet

There are several sources of advice for scientists on media strategy. Most are published by science organisations in developed countries, but they contain useful advice for scientists in developing countries.

The Natural Environmental Research Council, based in the United Kingdom, has a user-friendly and useful website.
http://www.nerc.ac.uk/publications/communicatingyourideas/index_Guidance%20notes.shtml

http://nasw.org/csn/ is a website is organised by The National Association of Science Writers, a United States based group.

http://www2.ifr.bbsrc.ac.uk/stempra/advice.html is a British site that offers advice for individuals who deal with science communications.

Another British site that offers invaluable advice on how work with the media is at:
http://www.esrc.ac.uk/4books/medframeset.html .

A report from the Wellcome Trust offers on "The role of scientists in public debate" can be found at:
http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/en/images/pubdebatenew.doc_3829.pdf (Requires Adobe Acrobat Reader to view).

http://www.nserc.ca/seng/how1en.htm is a Canadian site that gives useful information on how to communicate science to the public.

Finally, http://www.esrc.ac.uk/whom/whomenu.html is British report that examines the ramifications of science communications.

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(2) Nelkin, Dorothy. 1995, revised. Selling Science: How the press covers science and technology. New York: WH Freeman & Company.