



# Working with the Media

A guide for researchers

## **Acknowledgements**

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Newspaper vendor in Jakarta, Indonesia  
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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	2
<b>1 Before the research starts</b>	3
Developing your media strategy	3
Decide which media to target	4
Think about the type of media content that your research could produce	4
Plan the timing of your research launch	4
<b>2 During the research</b>	5
Decide on the key messages you want to get across	5
Build relationships with a handful of journalists	5
<b>3 After completing the research</b>	7
Inviting journalists to launch events or meetings	7
Press releases	7
Writing a feature article	9
Television and radio interviews	9
Tips for interviews	10
<b>4 Online services and further reading</b>	12

## Introduction

This guide has been designed to support strategic thinking on media engagement and to address researchers' need to act autonomously. Step-by-step practical advice on working with different sections of the media has been combined with information about the options available and recommendations about what to consider when developing a media strategy.

This guide is predominantly aimed at UK staff but many of the points are relevant for researchers internationally. However, specific sources of information on the media in each relevant country do need to be developed. The accompanying background paper *Getting into the Kitchen: Media strategies for research* examines some of the current and potential connections between policy, research and the media as well as working through in more detail the steps to follow in developing a media strategy.

### Why should researchers engage with the media?

There are many opportunities – and some risks – from engaging with the media. By building up relationships of trust with journalists and providing materials in an accessible manner, you will increase media understanding of your research messages and reduce potential risks in media engagement.

The media needs you. A public affairs or communications specialist can be relied on to handle the media well, but it is your in-depth understanding of an issue that journalists and broadcasters are really interested in. As a researcher, you add credibility to a news story. You can get across the complex issues that your research reflects, and at the same time bring human interest (drawn from case studies, household surveys or anthropological content).

Bringing your research to the attention of journalists can help you to:

- Inform and share findings with the general public, specialist audiences and policy-makers
- Strengthen links with other organisations and networks
- Generate wider public debate of research findings
- Influence policy and practice
- Promote research accountability
- Stimulate others to challenge policy-makers to respond to research findings
- Market and raise the profile of your research programme, organisation or an individual researcher.

For a discussion of these opportunities from engaging with the media, see *Getting into the Kitchen: Media strategies for research*, Panos, 2006.

# Before the research starts

# 1



Interviewing subsistence farmers for a community radio station in Chad  
GIACOMO PIROZZI | PANOS PICTURES

## Developing your media strategy

Engaging with the media takes time and effort. Think carefully about your media strategy before making contact with journalists. Consider the following:

- **Time:** How much time can you realistically put aside to liaise with journalists?
- **Financial resources:** Have you built funds for dissemination or media engagement into your research budget?
- **Skills:** What relevant skills do you have in your research team (e.g. outgoing individuals happy to be interviewed, or people with the writing skills to put together press releases or feature articles)?
- **Support:** How can the non-research staff best assist you (i.e. public affairs, communications and administrative specialists)?
- **The content of your research:** What kind of ‘story’ might your research produce? Will it be ‘news’ or more suited to a feature article that draws out the human interest?
- **Your key messages:** What key points do you want to convey? (see Box 1 on page 5)
- **Your organisation’s broader communications strategy:** Do your plans fit within the broader communications strategy of your organisation? How much scope is there for autonomous decision-making?

Engaging the media requires a team effort. Much of the preparatory work can benefit from input from communications specialists or support from administrative staff. However, as the researcher, you need to oversee the work and take the lead on some tasks. For example, you should be involved in developing messages and approve the final version. You are the best person to make contact with journalists, given that you are the person they are most interested in talking to. This guide takes you through the stages involved in engaging the media.

### Decide which media to target

Be clear about your organisation's communications strategy and about your own objectives for engaging with the media. This will help you decide which media to target. The media you target will depend on who you want to reach and how you want to influence them.

Potential media targets in **donor countries and internationally** are:

- **National print and broadcast media** (national newspapers and current affairs magazines, radio, and television): important if you want to have a high profile and stimulate a government response. Radio and television can also help to increase public debate on an issue.
- **National and international specialist press:** a means to reach people in positions of influence.
- **Online media** (websites, e-forums and newsletters): enable you to reach new audiences quickly and cheaply (see page 12 for details of online services).

Potential media targets in **southern countries** are:

- **National print and broadcast media:** important to stimulate a national government response.
- **Regional print and broadcast media:** useful in reaching local government decision-makers and civil society organisations.
- **Local or community broadcast and print media:** a means to reach street-level bureaucrats and community-based organisations, to raise public debate and to increase accountability of your research among participants' communities.

### Think about the type of media content that your research could produce

Different types of content for **print media** are: news report, news in brief, news backgrounder, feature, investigative feature, comment or analysis (essay), interview, opinion piece (editorial or columnist), letter, cartoon, announcement.

Different types of content for **broadcast media** are: news, announcement, spot (30–60 second advert or public information filler), documentary, feature or mini-feature, talk show, drama.

Consider the time and resources required to produce different types of media content and build these into your research budget.

### Plan the timing of your research launch

Will you only want to talk to journalists when the final paper is published?  
Or will interesting information be produced earlier in the project?

Journalists like to have a reason to tell a story – or a 'news hook'. The media will be more likely to cover your research if you launch it around the time of an appropriate newsworthy event, such as a campaign, a UN day, an intergovernmental conference or a roundtable meeting (see the UN calendar – [www.un.org/events/calendar](http://www.un.org/events/calendar)). Be as opportunistic and creative as possible in tying research to events and topics.

## During the research

# 2



Researchers gathering information from slum dwellers in Kolkata, India  
PETER BARKER | PANOS PICTURES

### Decide on the key messages you want to get across

- Pull out one or two key points that your research makes or key questions it is asking. Distilling your research into key messages can take time.
- Follow the news. How can your research findings inform current public debates?
- Is your story a news item linked to a specific date? Or is it a feature story, such as a human interest piece, or an opinion piece? (Feature articles depend more on personal contact with the journalists. See below on building relationships with journalists.)

### Box 1: Key messages

Prepare one or two key messages you want to communicate.

- Remove any jargon or terminology that is not appropriate for your target media.
- Unless your media strategy is designed to be confrontational, steer clear of wholly negative messages. Your target media will probably not want to cover very gloomy stories and is interested in research which has clear recommendations for action.
- Be careful not to oversimplify your message.

### Build relationships with a handful of journalists

#### Step 1 – Put together a list of journalists

Start by reading newspapers and listening to radio/TV programmes (not just your favourites); note the name of potentially interested journalists. Use online directories to find contact details for newspapers, radio and television stations. (The following directories cover UK media: [www.newspapersoc.org.uk](http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk); [www.itc.org.uk](http://www.itc.org.uk); [www.mediauk.com](http://www.mediauk.com).)

## **Step 2 – Make contact**

Once you have general contact details, phone the newsdesk at each organisation to get names, job titles and contact details of the people you want to contact. Wait until you have some 'new' information to give the journalists before calling them. Introduce yourself with a brief phone call, find out the best time to send the person information and their 'lead-in' times (i.e. how far in advance they need it – this can be just days for newspapers, but weeks or months for magazines). Check whether they want it by fax or e-mail. Always make this call in the morning, as journalists are busy writing in the afternoon. Keep a record of the details of the person and when you last spoke to them.

## **Step 3 – Focus on one or two journalists**

Once you have identified one or two journalists who may be interested in issues that your research raises, build a relationship with them to get a feel for what they are interested in. If it turns out they are not interested, move on to someone else.

Keep your hand-picked journalists up to date with every stage of your research:

- Tell them about new findings as they emerge.
- Invite them to attend events. They are more likely to remember you once they have met you and are more likely to use material from people they know and trust.
- Always respond promptly to any press enquiries.



## After completing the research

# 3



Watching TV at a kiosk  
in Bamako, Mali  
HELDUR NETOCNY | PANOS PICTURES

### Inviting journalists to launch events or meetings

- Explain the purpose of the event. Tell journalists what is interesting about it for them.
- Make sure the right people are available to talk to the journalists who will be attending. Ideally, these people should be briefed about the journalists.
- Prepare a handout containing some background information about the research project, including a brief history and some facts and figures.

### Press releases

A press release must contain some real news that will be of interest to your target media. It must be well-written, simple and free of jargon or technical terms.

- A press release should mimic the style and format of a news story (see Box 2 on page 8).
- Link the press release to a launch event or public meeting if there is one.
- Make sure the press release is sent out two days before a launch event. You could also send out a shorter advance press release ten days before.

Once you have written your press release, ask yourself:

- Have you emphasised what's new about your research?
- Have you explained what is of interest to your target media?

### Sending your press release

- If possible, send it on Sunday – journalists often need stories for Monday's papers and Sunday afternoon news programmes.
- Send it early in the day.
- Don't try to compete with a huge news story. Wait for a relatively quiet news period.

### **Making a follow-up phone call**

- You must phone to check that the press release has been received. Just a quick call will do: “Did you get it? Will you be covering it? Do you need any more information?”
- Don't phone journalists in the afternoon. Editorial decisions will have already been made.
- Be ready to summarise the story in one or two sentences. Journalists are likely to be busy and offhand, but don't be put off.
- The first question a journalist often asks is, “What's it all about then?”. If they are a broadcast journalist, this is a chance to demonstrate that you are a suitable interviewee.

### **Be accessible**

- Once you have sent your press release, make sure you are available to talk to journalists. Have a mobile number.
- Respond promptly to press enquiries.

### **Box 2: Press release format**

- Use A4 letter-headed paper. Put 'NEWS RELEASE' or 'PRESS RELEASE', the date and your contact details at the top. Double space the text. Leave 6cm blank at the top for the sub-editor to write printer's instructions and a 4cm left margin for the editor's amendments.
- If you do not wish the story to be published at once, or if you want the journalist to know that nobody else will publish it before they do, write 'EMBARGO: Not for publication or broadcast before XX hours, XX date' at the top of the page.
- Begin with a headline (this should be attention grabbing, therefore not too clever or mysterious), no more than eight words long and in a bold font.
- The first paragraph should be one or two sentences that sum up the main findings and are backed up with facts and figures (boil your message down to its essence).
- The rest of the text should distil the research into three or four main points, backed up with facts and figures. (Make sure you cover who, why, what, where and when.)
- Add a conclusion and the main policy implications for the way forward.
- At the end of the press release text, type 'ENDS' in a bold font.
- Follow the main text with your contact details again (where you will definitely be contactable for at least the next two days, both in and out of office hours).
- End with additional information for editors: the word count; a short description of your institution; relevant basic information and statistics; and your organisation's website address.

### Writing a feature article

To write a feature article, you need to have something striking and convincing to say, and illustrate it with concrete examples, quotes, human interest stories, and pictures. The feature may have to be published under the name of a senior member of staff in your organisation. If so, make sure they are happy with what you have written before you send it in. Alternatively, the feature could be published as if it were by the paper's own staff.

- Read the paper first and familiarise yourself with the style the readers expect.
- State the main points and argument in the first paragraph – many readers only read this.
- Keep to the length required by the editor.
- Use double-spacing and wide margins for sub-editor's amendments.

### Television and radio interviews

If you agree to be interviewed it is because you have a message you want to communicate. However, the interviewer may have a different reason for interviewing you. Preparation is the key to getting your message across.

#### Step 1 – Before you agree to be interviewed, find out:

- What type of programme is it? Who is the audience? What is the programme about?
- Why has the producer chosen to interview you?
- What does the interviewer know about you, your organisation and the topic? What are they likely to want to know about these things?
- Are other people going to be interviewed on the same topic for the programme? If so, who are they? What are they likely to say?

#### Step 2 – Once you have agreed to be interviewed, ask:

- How long will the interview be?
- Will the interview be broadcast live, recorded or be edited before broadcast?
- How many minutes of the interview will actually be broadcast?
- Who else is being interviewed for the programme?
- What questions will the interviewer ask?

#### Step 3 – Prepare yourself:

Think of three key related points which will get your message across. Your audience can't take in much more information than this.

If you haven't done many interviews, practise with a friend a couple of days beforehand. Practise expressing your three points in simple, straightforward language. Spend some time with a colleague considering the challenging questions the interviewer might ask.

## **Tips for interviews**

### **General tips**

- Have a purpose for doing the interview.
- Aim for no more than three points/messages.
- Give good examples or an anecdote to back up your points.
- Find out as much about the interviewer's objectives as possible.
- Know what you want to say before the interview begins.
- Assume the journalist is an expert in journalistic skills, but not an expert in your field.
- Remember, anything you say after the interview has finished may still be quoted.

### **Tips for TV interviews**

- Listen to the question.
- Present your main point first.
- Don't get angry – be assertive not aggressive.
- Don't be afraid to gesture naturally. Smile when appropriate.
- Try not to fidget; be aware of other nervous habits.
- At the end of the interview, don't leave your chair until someone indicates that you should do so. Maintain your posture and facial expression.

### **Tips for radio interviews**

- The pace of radio interviews is often faster than on TV.
- No one can see you, so you can use written notes, but be conversational.
- As no one can see you, make sure your tone of voice sounds enthusiastic.
- Talk as if you are speaking to a friendly acquaintance. Use the word 'you'.
- Use powerful, imaginative words and phrases.
- Be concise. Don't ramble. Pause before you make a new point.
- The interviewer may not have eye contact with you and may gesture to a technician while you're talking.
- Be prepared for a cupboard-sized studio.

If the interview is conducted over the telephone:

- Before the interview, find out exactly what the interviewer wants from you.
- Make sure you use a phone where there will be no disturbances.
- Keep relevant materials by the phone and write down the key points you want to make.

### **Tips for print interviews**

- Print interviews tend to go on for 30 minutes or more. Do not get lulled into a false sense of security just because there are no cameras or microphones.
- Note any information you could not provide in the interview or that you need to check.
- Encourage the journalist to call you if they need further information later or to verify facts.

If the interview is to be conducted over the telephone:

- Ask what the interviewer wants exactly – the story they plan to write, whether they are contacting other interviewees, and the context of the piece.
- Focus your mind on the task. Write down key points you wish to make.
- Keep relevant materials by the phone. Avoid any disturbances.
- Finish the call when you have made your points and do not want to make any more.
- If the issue is complicated, offer to meet the journalist in person or to send material first.
- If a journalist calls asking for an immediate quote, promise to call back and spend a few minutes preparing your ground. Call back as soon as possible.



Cybercafé in Bangalore, India  
PAUL SMITH | PANOS PICTURES

### Online services

A number of online services specialise in getting research findings out to wider audiences, including the media.

- **Development Gateway:** Join different topic groups and upload research papers and other documents at: <http://topics.developmentgateway.org>
- **ELDIS:** A gateway to information on development issues. Submit research papers and other documents online at: [www.eldis.org/contribute/cfadd/adddoc.cfm](http://www.eldis.org/contribute/cfadd/adddoc.cfm)
- **Global Development Network:** A network of research and policy institutes. Submit research papers at: [www.gdnet.org/knowledge\\_base/research\\_papers/contribute\\_documents/index.html](http://www.gdnet.org/knowledge_base/research_papers/contribute_documents/index.html)
- **id21:** A free development research reporting service for UK-resourced research on developing countries. Submit research papers in abstract form at: [www.id21.org/id21-info/stylesheet.html](http://www.id21.org/id21-info/stylesheet.html)
- **INASP** (International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications): Runs a directory of free and online resources. See: [www.inasp.info/peri/free.html](http://www.inasp.info/peri/free.html)
- **Panos Global Network:** Contact the relevant Panos network member to explore how your research may be covered by in-country media: [www.panos.org.uk/about/worldwide.asp](http://www.panos.org.uk/about/worldwide.asp)
- **RELAY:** Communicating Research: Panos London's RELAY programme works with media in the South to bring important research findings and recommendations to public attention. For your research to be considered as the basis for an online print or radio feature, please e-mail details to [relay@panos.org.uk](mailto:relay@panos.org.uk). For more information, visit [www.panos.org.uk/relay](http://www.panos.org.uk/relay)
- **E-forums and newsletters:** Get involved with e-forums and newsletters. Some provide the opportunity to discuss new knowledge and experience, some offer a record of government policy in various sectors or countries and others are focused on news and announcements related to a range of development themes. Forums are often established in the run-up to important development events, so check relevant websites for any opportunities to talk about your research.

**Further reading**

CAFOD, *How to get media coverage*

[www.cafod.org.uk/resources/how\\_to/get\\_media\\_coverage](http://www.cafod.org.uk/resources/how_to/get_media_coverage)

CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, *Handling the Media*

[www.civicus.org/new/default.asp](http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp)

Economic and Social Research Council, *Communications Toolkit*

[www.esrc.ac.uk/commstoolkit/intro.asp](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/commstoolkit/intro.asp)

Economic and Social Research Council, *Heroes of Dissemination*

[www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/PublicationsList/4books/heroframeset.html](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/PublicationsList/4books/heroframeset.html)

Global Development Network, *Toolkit: Disseminating Research Online*

[www.gdnet.org/online\\_services/toolkits/disseminating\\_research\\_online/](http://www.gdnet.org/online_services/toolkits/disseminating_research_online/)

The Media Trust, *Online guides*

[www.mediatrust.org](http://www.mediatrust.org)

George Monbiot, *An Activist's Guide to Exploiting the Media*

<http://tash.gn.apc.org/medactiv.htm>

University of Edinburgh, *Guidelines for Staff dealing with the Media*

[www.cpa.ed.ac.uk/services/media/Media\\_Guidelinesfinal.doc](http://www.cpa.ed.ac.uk/services/media/Media_Guidelinesfinal.doc)

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