



Tips for Using the Media

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The media is taken to include community, local, national and international forms of radio, print, television and on-line services. These can be commercial or non-commercial.

The media plays a number of distinct, but complementary roles in the communication of research¹. First, it can **inform** people that research is underway, or to disseminate findings. Second, it can play the role of **connector** by building links with groups interested in similar subjects, and forging alliances for further work. Third, the media can highlight issues and reshape the parameters of debate and discussion, specifically (a) building public support for a particular agenda and (b) reaching particular policymakers (a recent consultative exercise conducted by ID21 – the research communications service funded by DFID and hosted by IDS www.id21.co.uk – found that the best way to reach Kenya's officials was by publication in the national newspapers). Fourth, it can provide a forum for debate at local, national and international levels. Fifth, it can market the research subject, the research institute, the programme or the researchers themselves, thereby building reputation that is necessary 'to be heard' by those in positions to influence policy and practice.

Models of policy processes (see Section 2) suggest that influencing the policy discourse is a necessary part of specific policy influence, and the media play a vital role in shaping and amplifying this public discourse. Remember, however important the policy maker, he or she is also an information consumer who probably subscribes to a newspaper and listens to the radio when they wake up in the morning.

TOP TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Before you even begin to engage with the media, it is important that you have an overall communications plan in mind (if not in body). Such a plan should set specific objectives for media engagement, that make it easier to target certain publications and journalists, and not others. It is also important to be realistic and honest about how much time, and what resources you have to spend on media activities, and to build these into your research budget.

A. Take time to find out how the media works

- For electronic media (television and radio), review news broadcasts and build up a profile of the news content. Analyse the programming schedules to see what kind of regular broadcasts might cover the research topics you're involved with. Do the same with the print media, finding out as much about which audiences they are reaching as possible, so that you can target the most appropriate.
- Build up a positive communications environment for your messages by:
 1. *Observing* the situation and events around your issue as they unfold in the public domain.
 2. *Profiling* the level of public interest in the issues as reflected in public debate (e.g. how often are debates held? Do talk-shows focus on the issues and what sort of audiences do they generate? Are radio phone-ins lively when they take your issue as their topic etc.?)

3. *Keeping a pulse* on policy debates and the key people behind current debates, as well as the rising stars with their own, new agendas (this will help in the identification of targets for any advocacy work that you may want to do).
4. *Research* which communications mediums are reaching the kinds of audiences you want to reach with your messages. Profile the kind of language that is being used to communicate information around your issue, and who are the main organisations and individuals with views and evidence to submit on the subject.

B. Create a media contact list

- Identify the journalists in the media who are responsible for, and have written about your research topic. Your organisation might have a Press Office that already holds a database that you could use as a resource. Don't just target the national media – they are the hardest to get a story in unless your research becomes genuine 'news' e.g. a vaccine breakthrough. Coverage in local radio and newspapers, and in specialist journals and magazines is often an entry point into larger circulation media because journalists tend to scan 'smaller' media for story ideasⁱⁱ.
- Prepare a contact list of the decision makers (gate keepers) i.e. the editors and producers working at different levels and their role in identifying and selecting stories
- Remember that there are more and more news and feature outlets but fewer journalists who work fulltime for them. In the old days, getting to know the key 'development journalists' and energy correspondents on the major newspapers for example would increase the likelihood that your story will get picked up and used. As staffers are being replaced by freelance journalists, you need to be more creative and strategic in who you make friends with. Remember that freelance journalists have a problem of getting hold of stories that will sell, so you need to think of your knowledge product as something which can solve their problems and ask yourself 'how can this information solve their (and your) problem?' and craft it accordingly. Hints and tips include (a) Getting into the places that freelancers look for their story ideas
e.g. JournalismNet for Africa <http://journalismnet.com/africa/#journalism> ;
Association of British Science Writers <http://www.absw.org.uk> ;
Online directory of most newspaper titles in the UK www.newspapersoc.org.uk
Online directory of TV stations in the UK www.itc.org.uk
TV, radio and newspapers throughout the UK www.mediauk.com

C. Decide on a few key messages

identify what is the body of evidence that can underpin these messages. It helps to prepare background papers that are less than one side of A4 for each message, that you can give as 'supporting evidence' to journalists: their attention span can probably be held for this length but no longer. Remember to put contact names, telephone numbers and email addresses on all such documents – and be willing to field calls helpfully at any time of day whether it be reasonable or not. You cannot 'call the shots' with the media until you – or your research – have become a valuable commodity, so until then you need to be helpful, co-operative and infinitely pliable.

If you have an international team responsible for research, you will need to bespoke the research findings for different outlets, e.g. country slant for southern national press, human interest for general magazine etc. You might find it easier to penetrate southern newspapers through news wire agencies (e.g. Panos Institute, Interpress Service) that get picked up by southern papers.

D. Create a relationship with the media

- Try to develop a relationship with a few key journalists that are (a) interested in your research issues (b) in positions of influence over what stories are printed/broadcast. This will make them more likely to do a story, and to cover it with greater understanding of the subject matter.
- Find out how best to communicate with journalists. Press Releases are still the main way of informing the media about story, but remember that news desks on national papers can receive more than 200 releases each day, so yours needs to stand out.
- Invest in journalists before you actually need them so that when you do, they understand the subject. 'Court' them as you would policymakers; inviting them to some of your meetings or

workshops as a way of getting them to understand your work better. Invite them to visit projects where possible so that they witness first hand the people behind the research hypotheses.

E. Polish up your media skills

You need to be familiar with the basic tools used to engage the media.

- **Press Releases** should be interesting, concise and tell the reporter what they need to know about who, what, when, why, where of the story. A short paragraph of background information, possibly with some facts and figures, would be useful if you're looking for a feature. Always include the name of a contact person in the organisation and be prepared to roll out a spokesperson who is able to talk articulately about the issues in layperson's language
- **News conference** - Invite journalists to a news conference. A news conference is a good way of getting the media's attention when you want to announce a new development (breakthrough in avoiding HIV/AIDS transmission from parent to child, the launch of a campaign, release of a report, etc.
 1. Use very little time to present your issue, taking too long will result in the media losing their interest because they are often under strict deadlines.
 2. Allow more time for journalists to ask you as many questions as possible.
 3. Use this chance to get your experts and other sources to speak as well. Journalists like quoting as many people as possible on an issue.
 4. Polish up your interviewing skills beforehand. Useful and practical tips for TV, radio and print interviews available on Edinburgh University's Media Guide for Staff (http://www.cpa.ed.ac.uk/services/media/Media_Guidelinesfinal.doc)
- **Writing letters to the editor**, specifically responding to articles carried in recent editions of the paper/journal expressing your opinions around a research topic can be an effective way of raising your profile, and stimulating debate around important issues. Be explicit in your letter whose opinions you are expressing - your organisation or your own personal opinions. Your letters should be short, maybe 200-300 words at most, but these guidelines – and estimates of the paper's readership - can be obtained by contacting the paper.
- **Explore opportunities for highlighting your issues on existing programmes.** Broadcasting stations sometimes have programmes that you can work through to profile some issues of interest to you. You can explore opportunities for participating in some of these programmes with the relevant producers. Producers are always looking for ideas and we should not hesitate to approach. It is important however to think about the proposal that you will present to them to get their interest.
- **Identify 'pegs' on which to hang your research messages.** The media tend to cover the big development events e.g. UN Days, intergovernmental conference etc. and need in-depth and human interest stories to make the news items interesting. You need to do some homework to identify what research results, approaches and issues 'tie in' to the bigger event before you approach the media, because that is what they will want to know. You can try to create your own '**hooks**' that entice the media to cover your story on its own, but you will need stronger relationships with journalists for this approach to be successful.
- **Identify and prepare spokespersons within the organisation** to speak on specific issues. Having someone specific to 'roll out' for the media or for public events, who can speak authoritatively, eloquently and persuasively on the issues will be invaluable in promoting your research. This may not necessarily be the most senior research person in the project: remember that the skills needed to be a top researcher are not necessarily the same as those needed to field difficult questions or transmit short, succinct soundbites in a radio broadcast. Spokespeople need training (could be in-house practice or at an external media training centre) and improve with practice. Mistakes are better made to local audiences e.g. hospital radio, local newspapers, than to national and international audiences, so do your initial training up in these forums.

F. Be realistic about where you can 'sell' your story

Coverage on the front page of a national newspaper is more often than not because of a disaster or scandal that we wouldn't wish on our biggest competitor, and brings with it the kind of media coverage that unearths the 'unimportant' parts of our research that we don't want examined. Be realistic about what audiences would be interested in your research. Don't be afraid to start small:

specialist publications are not only more likely to cover your project than the national press, they often spark off articles in bigger newspapers and journals, or are filed away in cuttings drawers and pulled out when the research topic 'becomes news'.

G. Make use of online services to reach mass audiences

There are many online services which specialise in getting research findings to a wider audience, including the media. They offer a quick, free method of exposing your work to new audiences and include:

- Development Gateway (instructions for contributing new research)
- ELDIS
- Global Development Network
- ID21
- INASP including the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI)
- Panos and RELAY (specialist programme for communicating research)

H. GUIDES, REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Guidelines for Staff dealing with the Media, University of Edinburgh

http://www.cpa.ed.ac.uk/services/media/Media_Guidelinesfinal.doc

Heroes of Dissemination, The Economic and Social Research Council

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/PublicationsList/4books/heroframeset.html>

Online guides, The Media Trust

www.mediatrust.org

How to get media coverage, CAFOD Guide for Supporters

www.cafod.org.uk/resources/how_to/get_media_coverage

i From Getting into the kitchen: media strategies for research, A background paper produced for the Chronic Poverty Research Centre by the

Panos Institute, London, January 2005

ii ESRC have produced a useful guide to working with TV and Radio: Television and Radio: A Best Practice Guide, Ivor Gaber, ESRC 2004?

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/PublicationsList/4books/tvframeset.html>