

Dealings with the Media

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The media world, in which journalists work, is very different from the world of scientific research – and even from that of scientific communication through journals and conferences. So while scientists and biotechnologists can collaborate effectively with journalists, such collaboration needs to be based on mutual understanding. Unrealistic attitudes on either side can be a recipe for dissatisfaction, or worse.

The purpose of this briefing paper is to explain, particularly for scientists working in biotechnology, how the media operate. It shows how specialists and journalists can work together in ways that are constructive and may be mutually beneficial. This briefing paper therefore differs from most others in the series, which aim to review in a balanced way the various areas of biotechnology together with their related issues and implications.

What do the media want?

Newspapers and magazines, radio and television companies, receive a vast quantity of material every day of the year. It comes in many different forms. These include announcements from companies, government departments, research institutes and other bodies; material from national and international news agencies (*Reuters*, for example); and releases from public relations firms representing their clients' interests. The lay media also gain ideas from specialised publications such as *Nature* and other major journals of science. Sheer pressure on space and broadcasting time means that journalists can use only a tiny proportion of the information they receive through these various channels. How, then, do they choose what to cover?

Journalists and their gate-keepers (see below) are receptive to novelty. Significant developments in science and technology – for example, major advances in the treatment of a particular disease – provide many examples of such novelty. As well as developments with concrete applications now or in the future, the media report discoveries that are simply inherently interesting. So while much “normal research” goes unreported, developments with practical implications for, say, medicine or agriculture will attract journalistic attention. The same is true of discoveries that are counter-intuitive or have an element of the unexpected.

The general media also feed off each other to a surprising degree, and they work to unwritten menus of topics that appeal to them at any one time. Stories about environmental pollution, for example, may be keenly sought this year but may be less popular with journalists and their editors next year. In engaging the interest of the media, it is helpful to be aware of what subjects are currently favoured on their agenda. Some of the most skillful initiatives in “placing” stories in the media are taken by people who see opportunities for providing new angles on stories that are already running strongly.

There is fierce competition within the media. Newspapers, for example, compete for readers and for advertising revenue. Nevertheless, their science correspondents often work closely together, attending many of the same conferences and discussing what they are planning to report. Many journalists also have an appetite for occasional “exclusive” stories – which, if they are considered to be sufficiently important, their competitors will then have to follow up.

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Briefing Paper

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Journalists and their gate-keepers

Journalists dealing with fields such as biotechnology do not work in isolation. Like their peers in other areas, they work to agendas that are determined by “gate-keepers” in newspaper, magazine and broadcasting offices. News Editors in newspapers, for example, largely determine the topics which they believe we all, as readers and listeners, wish to know about. The space allotted to any one topic can also change, even between one edition of a newspaper and the next, as other news breaks and is given higher priority.

The majority of major newspapers in Europe employ a Science Editor. Many of these have a first degree in science, and some a PhD, while others have specialised after being general reporters. Like local newspaper journalists, general reporters (who also cover science and technology) can be expected to have little or no background knowledge on the topics they cover. However, both science editors and general reporters need to “sell” their ideas for news stories to a News Editor, who in addition will ask them to cover stories that have been initiated through other channels.

Features Editors are responsible for the longer “feature” articles in newspapers and magazines. Many of them welcome timely suggestions from outside contributors – for example, a proposal for a review of hay fever and its treatment from a specialist in this area. Such proposals should be made well in advance – not only for the idea to be considered and the article commissioned and written, but also for it to appear in sufficient time for readers to make use of information it contains. There are numerous opportunities for scientists and their organisations to be pro-active in this way – though many are unaware of such openings, or believe (wrongly) that the media will not be interested in such proposals.

Radio and television

Broadcasting channels are like newspapers in having news-rooms to monitor the news. Science specialists, based in those news departments, provide appropriate coverage for news bulletins. They also work for current affairs programmes, responding to requests from their Editors.

Although precise titles vary in different parts of the broadcasting world and in different countries, the Editor is usually the

person in overall charge of weekly and other regular science programmes, with one or more producers responsible for individual programmes in the series. The Editor principally sets the agenda, though particular producers may be especially interested in specific topics within the general field covered by the programme. In radio, presenters often work closely with their producers in making editorial decisions. Local radio programmes, like local newspapers, are always keenly interested in stories with a local angle.

In most countries, independent production companies are now responsible for a substantial proportion of “dedicated” science programmes.

As with the print media, editors and presenters of programmes dealing regularly with science, medicine and applied disciplines invariably welcome suggestions about topics they may care to cover. Again, they are keenly interested in “pegs” on which to hang a story, so as to give an idea topicality. Examples of pegs are the publication of a paper in a major journal, the appearance of a report with public interest and the anniversary of an event such as a great discovery or the birth or death of a famous scientist. To be of use, contacts regarding topics and pegs of this sort need to be made weeks and preferably months in advance.

Dealing with journalists

Journalists, and certainly those dealing with news, are invariably in a hurry. For those working in newspapers and broadcasting, this haste is entirely genuine. They may well be pursuing several stories in a single day, against the clock. But rapidity is also built into the media culture, so that anything (an interview, a photograph...) tends to be wanted instantly.

There are also more practical considerations if your story or message is to appear in the media when you want it too and if at all. Newspapers usually have two internal news conferences to determine what will be in the paper the next day. If a press release misses the early evening conference, your story is unlikely to make it to print the next day unless it really is important. The best time of the day to contact a news desk is early to mid morning, yet this may not be suitable for an evening paper or a lunchtime radio or television news bulletin. The shelf life of a story is also painfully short: a long term

research project releases its result on a Friday afternoon; by the time of the next possible major news outlet on Monday, it will be considered old news and unlikely to get a place in the schedule. Afternoon press conferences are not a good way of getting communications into the media, and especially not on a Friday.

In reality, while journalists greatly appreciate an immediate response, it is perfectly reasonable that anyone approached by a reporter should ask for time to consider the request and how to respond.

If a journalist approaches you, in person or by telephone, make sure from the outset that you really understand what they want, what publication or programme they represent and how they propose to use any comments you make. In the case of radio and television, you should find out whether a proposed interview will be live or recorded, what is the format of the programme and who else will be taking part.

Even if you are satisfied on these points, you may want to collect your thoughts. Ask the caller to ring back in 20-30 minutes. Alternatively, say that **you** will return the call – but be absolutely sure that you do so. During the interim, you can also consult colleagues. Press officers in companies, universities and elsewhere can also be invaluable in providing guidance about particular journalists, publications and programmes and their past track-record.

In the long-term, some scientists find it mutually rewarding to become acquainted with individual journalists who deal with scientific issues, whether nationally or locally. While this should certainly not provide automatic channels through which to gain media publicity, such relationships can be of value to both parties and increase mutual confidence.

Being interviewed

There are several scenarios in which you may find yourself dealing with the media. These range from a scientific conference at which you are delivering a paper, to a telephone call from a journalist asking about your own work or seeking guidance about some development in your field. If there is a choice, it is more satisfactory and reassuring to meet a journalist face-to-face than to respond to a voice on the telephone. Paradoxically, some of us are more easily

tempted on the telephone into saying more than we would have wished.

A scientist may, on very rare occasions, be best advised not to speak to a journalist at all – for example, one who has a long record of serious misrepresentation. There are obvious dangers in declining an interview, however. Bear in mind too that it is entirely reasonable that a journalist should wish to talk to you. Be very cautious about total refusal.

If you are tempted to decline an interview simply because you are busy and can scarcely spare the time, remember that the journalist will go elsewhere. He or she may turn to someone who is less qualified to speak with real authority on the subject. Either way, you may wish to seek guidance from a press officer in your institute, company or university.

Even when you are speaking to specialist reporters who cover areas such as science and medicine regularly, remember that terms and ideas which are very familiar to you may be new to them and thus require careful explanation. A general reporter will know very little science at all. So do not assume much knowledge on the part of the interviewer, and do not worry about “talking down” to a journalist. It is far better to do this than to use technical jargon without any explanation. Choose commonplace words wherever possible. If technical terms are unavoidable, explain

them – perhaps using metaphors or analogies to get over difficult concepts.

Remember that a journalist is unlikely to stick solely to technical matters. He or she may also pose questions about the funding of your research, the repercussions of biotechnology for consumers or its implications for exports or imports. In preparing for the interview, think about the questions a reader or listener would expect to be raised and to have answered.

The most satisfactory basis for an interview – from the standpoint of both parties – is “on the record”. This means that the journalist can use and quote anything that you say. But there may be occasions when you prefer to conduct an entire interview, or part of it, “off the record” or “non-attributable”. It is important to reach an unambiguous agreement **in advance** about the conditions of the interview. 99 journalists out of 100 **will** respect any form of confidence you agree. Never use the expression “*No comment*”. There is always something less evasive that you can say.

If you are working in collaboration with a company or institute other than your own, as part of a joint research project, you must discuss journalistic enquiries and requests for interviews with your partner organisation and agree on what you will say.

Appearing on radio or television

Some scientists, even those with initial anxieties, prove to be natural performers on radio and television. Others fare less well. Television is a particularly demanding medium, especially in the unfamiliar environment of the studio. There are some dependable pieces of advice that are usually helpful. Be prepared – be absolutely clear about what you want to say and what is the purpose of your appearance. Always try to be positive. Never be angry or dismissive towards an interviewer, however difficult this may be, because there is a danger that this will alienate viewers or listeners.

While these guidelines are useful, practical experience is much more so. For those whose work and/or position in biotechnology mean that they are likely to be approached at any time for a broadcast interview, practical training is invaluable, especially for television. When embarking on media training, make sure that you are in the hands of people who currently work, or have very recently worked, in the

medium. Some courses of this sort are run by trainers who themselves have had little or no practical experience in television or radio. They are scarcely likely to be in a good position to advise you.

A key question about a radio or television appearance is whether it is recorded or live. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. While some people are more nervous about a live interview, others appreciate the opportunity to say exactly what they wish to say, without any possibility that their words will be edited before transmission. Remember that, **in a news or current affairs programme**, the interviewer may wish you to crystallise your viewpoint/comments in a “sound bite” of at most 30 seconds. Remember too that, as with public speaking, a little nervousness actually helps.

Can I check the copy?

If you help a journalist who is writing a **news** story, it is not usually realistic to expect to see and approve the final text. There is usually insufficient time, and the copy may well be edited much later in the day when it is beyond the writer’s control, let alone your influence. However, journalists are usually willing, in the interests of accuracy, to phone you back to check any quotes they wish to use. This can be part of your agreement with them beforehand. Remember that, while such quotes should be accurate, they cannot carry all of the fine distinctions which are appropriate to statements made in a paper in a learned journal.

It is much more realistic to expect to see a text, or a rough-cut of a programme, if you are dealing with a journalist who is working on a longer time-scale. Examples include a writer preparing a feature article for a magazine or newspaper and a radio or television journalist making a documentary. Again, ensure that you agree on this beforehand. Writers and producers will always be grateful to you for correcting blatant inaccuracies. They do not wish to be seen to be making mistakes.

Will I be paid?

Newspapers and magazines do not usually pay for interviews, whereas radio and television programmes may offer a fee or respond positively if asked for one – especially if they wish to take up a substantial amount of your time. However, there are no universal rules. On the one

Ten Golden Rules

Be well briefed

Plan the points you wish to make and your responses to standard questions and arguments

If you are in doubt, be prepared to say “*I don’t know*”

Be as open as possible and never lie

Do not say “*No comment*”; there is always something more useful which can be said

Show concern if there is a genuine problem

Show that your organisation is addressing the situation or issue

Be as positive as possible without sounding callous and uncaring

Beware of admitting liability

Have a list with contact details of trained spokes people available to make statements on specific questions

hand, you can reasonably expect to receive a modest fee if you are asked to go into a radio studio for a live or recorded interview. On the other hand, a television news crew may want to come to your laboratory and, despite the inevitable disruption, film you with no payment whatever. You will then have to weigh the time and inconvenience against the attendant benefits in publicity. There is often some flexibility for you to receive a fee even when it is not normally offered. Ask at the outset, not afterwards.

Television “researchers” pose particular problems. A researcher is not the producer or editor of a programme but a more junior member of staff who is employed to contact many different experts and develop a programme idea. Helping researchers can be beneficial to an organisation – not least on those occasions when a scientist manages to influence a programme, plans for which were moving in some unsatisfactory direction. But dealing with researchers can also turn out to be unproductive. Much will depend upon your personal inclination and the policy of your institution. Again, press officers can help in resolving a decision about whether to help researchers.

Press conferences and releases

At a formal press conference – during a scientific meeting, for example – journalists are invited to hear about new developments in research. Such occasions must be accompanied by a “hot-line”, open for at least 24 hours, so that journalists unable to attend can phone for information. Before a press conference, a press officer may ask for your help in preparing a “hand-out” – a sheet giving key points and the background to the announcement. Written notes of this sort are invaluable, as they are also on other occasions when you are interviewed by an individual journalist. As well as your name and position, a briefing sheet can contain information such as names of organisms and a summary of experimental results. This will be particularly useful for the general reporter who knows virtually nothing about the subject – for example, a local newspaper or radio journalist (who may even welcome a short list of key questions that he or she should ask you).

Press releases should also contain information about how to contact the key individual(s) involved – who **must** be available to be contacted through telephone or e-mail at the time as indicated. They are

usually embargoed, with a date and time before which the contents of the release must not be used. Journals such as *Nature* issue press releases every week, highlighting key papers in their next issue. Publication of an institute’s annual report is another occasion when press releases are used to draw attention to work described in the report.

The importance of effective press releases can hardly be exaggerated. Releases which describe developments of timely interest to journalists, which are clearly written and which contain all of the formal ingredients outlined above, are used far more widely than those which are deficient in these respects. Moreover, a company or institute that issues only well-prepared releases, carrying genuine news, encourages journalists to pay immediate attention to future releases from the same place. Press releases are not usually published verbatim, but they should be written in a style such that they could be – when time is extremely short, for example.

Causes of dissatisfaction

There are, inevitably, occasions when scientists feel unhappy about the outcome of their dealings with a journalist – in a newspaper article or television programme, or indeed the non-appearance of an article or broadcast item. If this happens to you, first pause and consider exactly why you are concerned. Is it because you gave your time to help with an article or programme that has been aborted? If so, while common courtesy may mean that you had a right to have been informed, there is invariably nothing else to be done. Many articles and radio and TV recordings are never used – for logistical reasons quite unconnected with quality.

Again, if you believe that you have been misrepresented in an article or programme,

consider carefully **why** you believe this to be so. Do you have a genuine grievance? Or are you really bothered because, for example, too much prominence has been given (in your opinion) to the ideas or achievements of another research group? In the latter case, discuss the matter with a colleague not involved in the work, wait until the next day and if you still feel as strongly, write a letter to the journalist setting out your point of view. This **will** be taken seriously.

In a particularly serious case, and again after talking to colleagues and/or your press officer, it may be appropriate to complain to the editor and/or to send a letter for publication. Even when not published, such letters **are** considered carefully and may well be taken on board when that subject is covered in future. Finally, there are options of reporting the journalist and publication to the official body in your country that deals with complaints about the press, or to take legal action if you believe that you have been defamed.

Be realistic

Some journalists are sometimes mischievous – as are some people in other walks of life. Journalists also make mistakes – as do some biotechnologists. Some of them sensationalise new developments – as do some biotechnology companies. Yet the vast majority of journalists do not set out to be mischievous, to make mistakes or to sensationalise their material. They work to the best of their ability and – especially given the pressures on their time – their output is of a high standard. Moreover, writers who specialise in areas such as science, medicine and technology have done so because they are keenly interested in those topics. They need your help, just as you may need theirs.

FURTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Hitting the Headlines - A Practical Guide to the Media by Stephen White, Peter Evans, Chris Mihill and Maryon Tysoe, British Psychological Society, Leicester, 1993

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Can I Quote You on That? by Frank Albrighton, Conference of University Administrators, Birmingham, 1986

Presenting Science to the Public by Barbara Gastel, ISI Press, Philadelphia, 1983

The Role of the Media in Science Communication edited by Kate Akrill, Ciba Foundation, London, 1994