

Engaging with the Media

Climate Communications Training -
Engaging with the Media



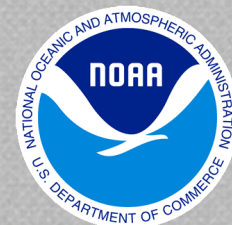
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April 9, 2013

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Talking to the Media is Not Rocket Science

As scientists, you have everything that you need to do this.

The key skill is to: Tell them what they need to know in a way that makes sense to them.

An interview with a member of the media is similar to other conversations with non-scientists—relatives, friends, policy makers— about your research.

The difference is this person needs to understand what you are saying and translate it to fit their audience, the public.

You need to give them the tools they need to do this.

We Asked, You Told

What are your biggest concerns?

“Not being as clear and concise as is possible to the audience while still communicating the nuances of my research”

“Lack of common language”

“Having things I say quoted out of context, or to imply things I did not intend”

Goals of This Workshop

To give you what you need to address these concerns:

- An understanding of the audience—in this case, the media
- Tips for preparing your messages and sound bites
- Guidance on the language to use
- To give you tools for dealing with media interviews

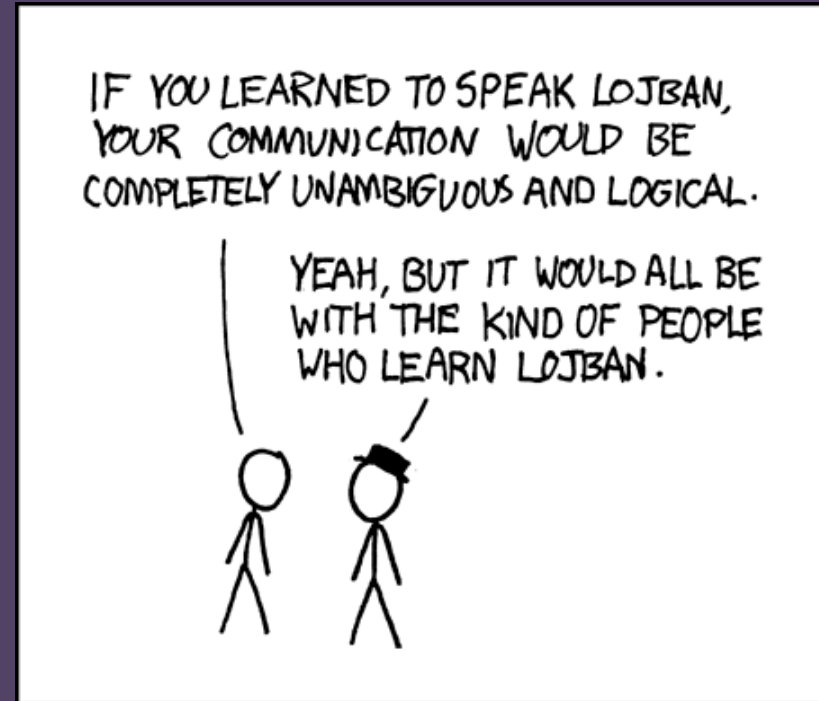
In short: The goal is to give you everything you need to build your own personalized **Media Communication Tool Kit**.

A kit that you can use in media interviews.

It Is All About the Audience

The goal of communication is to get the message that is in your head into their head.

- It is all about tailoring what you say to your audience.
- The media are simply another audience with their own motives, needs, and language.



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Scientists and Journalists: Worlds Apart?

1997 study by Vanderbilt University's First Amendment Center on relations between scientists and journalists

- **62%** of the journalists agreed that scientists are “so intellectual and immersed in their own jargon that they can't communicate with journalists or the public.”
- **90%** of scientists believed that few members of the news media understand the nature of science and technology

Welcome Trust study: face-to-face interviews with 1,652 randomly selected scientists.

- **Only 6%** of the scientists would trust journalists working for national newspapers to “provide accurate information about scientific facts.”

Understanding What Journalists Do: The Essence of a Newspaper/Magazine/Online Story

Two fundamental dimensions of journalism: content and style

Content is the “**meat**,” and style is the “**motion**,”

says Bruce Gellerman, former host of the public radio show “Here and Now.”



A Journalist's Goal: What Makes a Story Engaging?

Good stories have both **meat** and **motion**:

Meat is the message, and motion is what makes the story engaging.

Quotes or sound bites add **motion** to the story.

They can make the story lively and add gravity or even credibility (depending on the form of the quote and who says it).

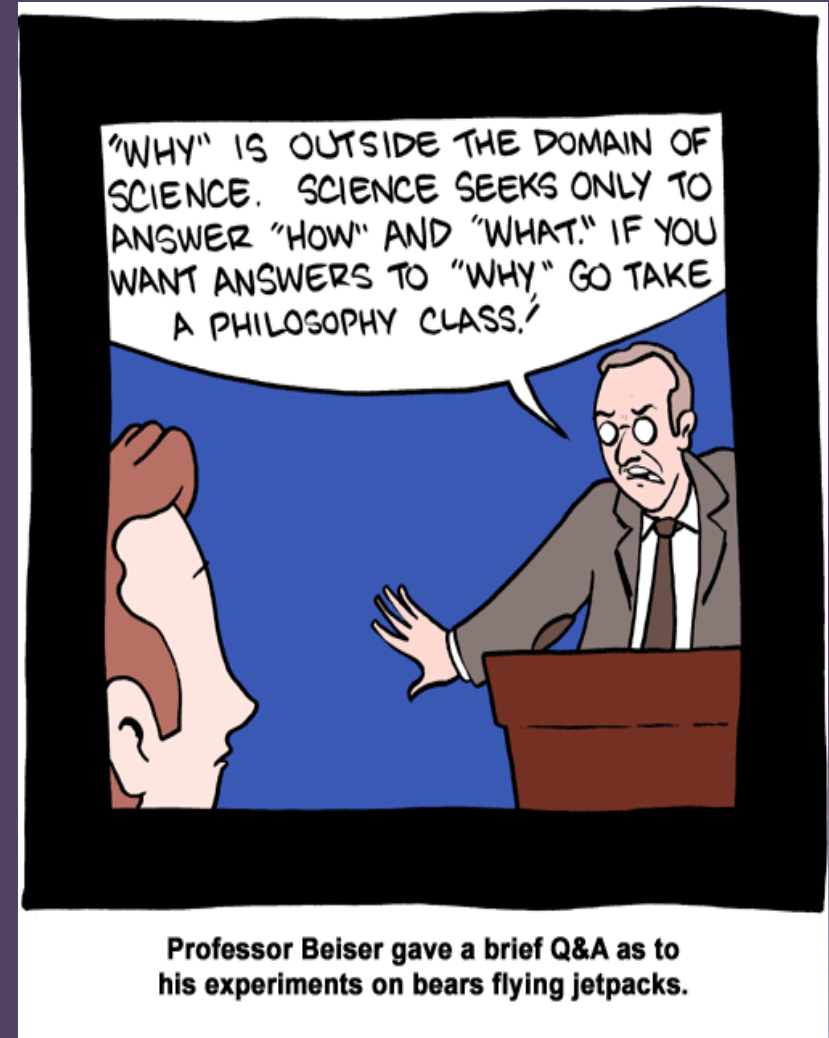
Journalists will generally NOT use quotes to say facts they can say themselves (**meat**)

They will typically paraphrase in such comments.

What Do Journalists Want?

They want to know your bottom line first:

- The main finding(s)
- The implications of the findings



What Do Journalists Want?

News/Obvious Breakthroughs

The meat/content has to be new/current.

Some scientific findings that are highly significant appear to be only incremental advances to the media



New rule for Science Journalism:

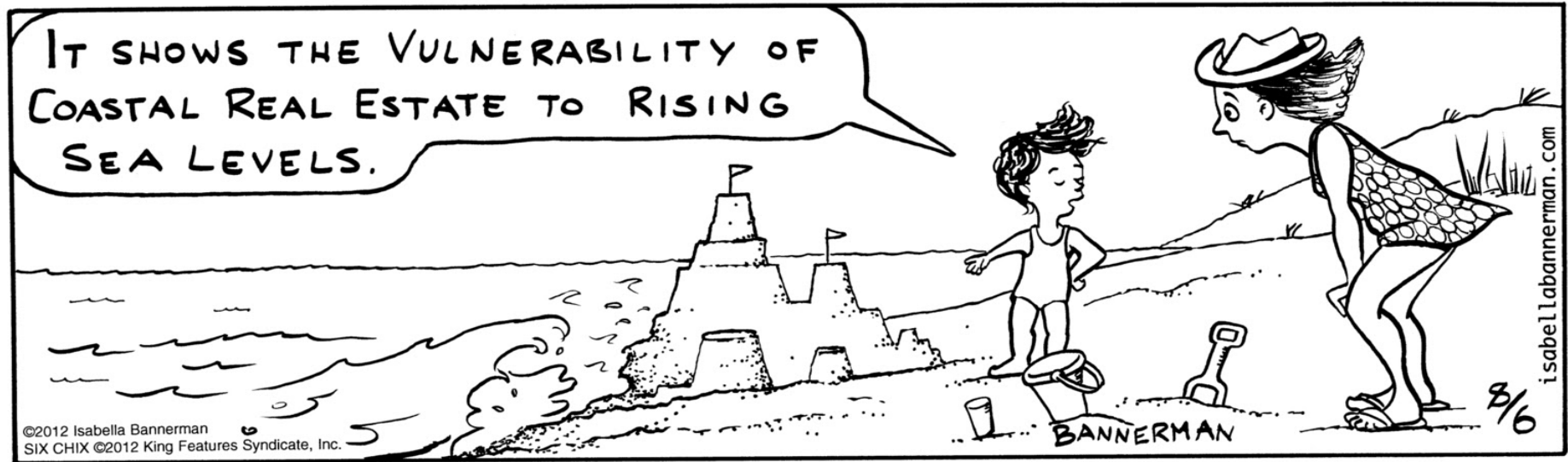
If your article can be summarized as "No."
don't write it.

<http://smbc-comics.com/index.php?db=comics&id=2075#comic>

What Do Journalists Want?

Typically science that is of relevance to the public

Notable exceptions: spectacular space stories or weird/cuddly animal stories



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What They Don't Want in Their Story

Journalists are highly limited by space and time—even more so now.

- Every detail of a scientific study's research design
- A history of previous studies
- Long, laborious explanations
- A thorough critique from other researchers
- Jargon



Communicating with Journalists

If reporters don't understand what a scientist is saying, how can they translate it for their audience?

OR

If scientists aren't clear and concise, how can they expect busy reporters to get it right?

IMPORTANT: If you want your research to be reported accurately, the onus is on you to prepare clear and concise messages to express the facts that you want to get across.

This is not something that you can do on the fly—It requires **PREPARATION** and **PRACTICE**.

The Media Tool Kit

Contains:

- Your “message”
- List of eight possible media questions you might be asked
 - Sound bite answers to those questions
- List of three sticky questions you might be asked
 - Sound bite answers to those questions

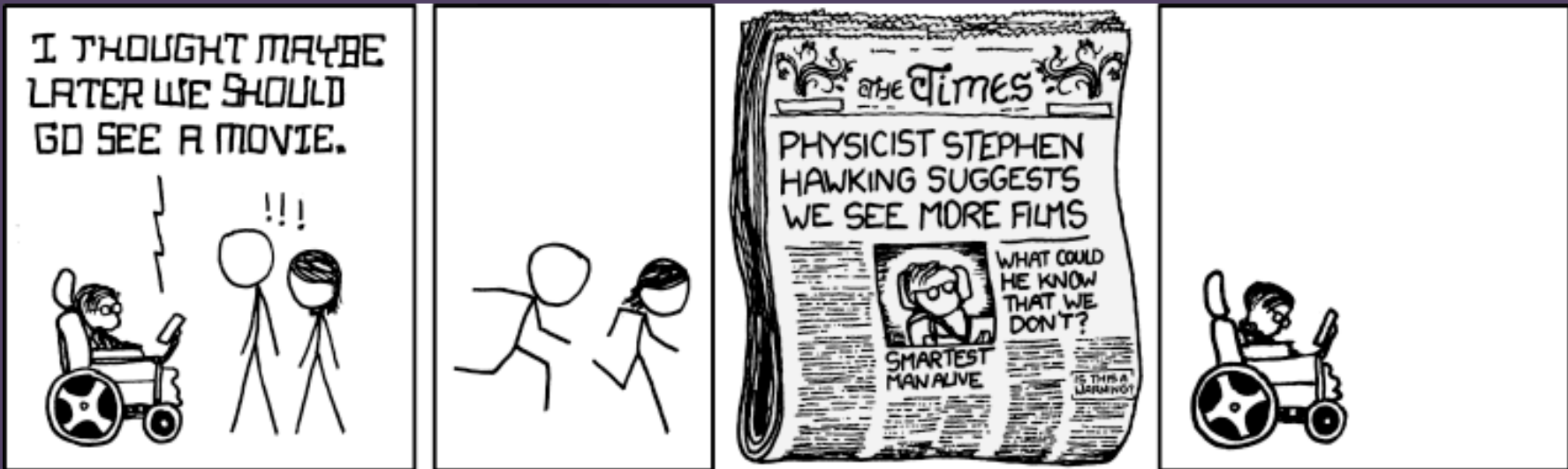
The ideal scenario is that you would have this in front of you in an interview, but that won't always be the case.

Just the act of assembling it will help you be more prepared for interviews.

What Is Your Message?

Your media message: The most important theme, fact, or opinion that you want your audience to know

Ask yourself: “How would I want the headline to read when I open tomorrow’s paper?” ~ your main message



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How Many Messages?

It may seem difficult to narrow your research down to three or four main points, but it is key.

If you stress three, maybe four points, you ensure the reporter knows what is important.

If you were to stress six/eight or more points, then reporter has to determine the main message, increasing the odds that a story won't match your intent.

“Figure out the take-home message, don't stray from it too much, and say it in a sufficient number of ways that they understand it.”

—M.A. Chan, an expert in conservation biology and environmental ethics at Stanford University



Leiserowitz et al.
2010

Tips for Preparing Key Messages

Keep it simple, but not simplistic.

—Use short sentences and short words without losing the message's essence or meaning (“dumbing it down”)



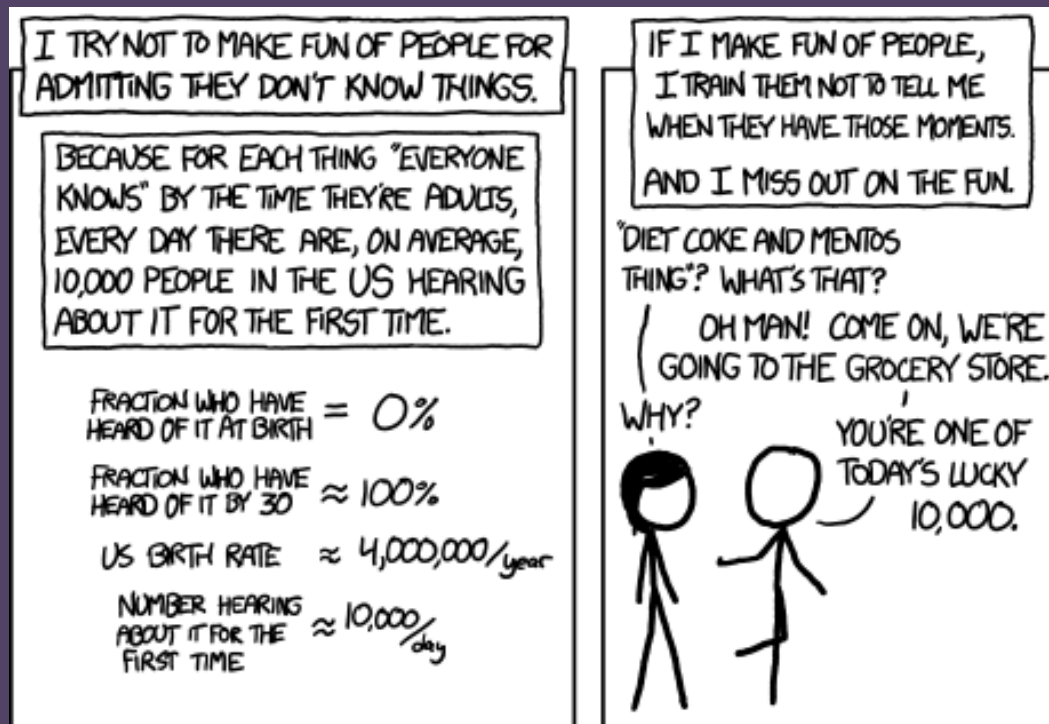
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Tips for Preparing Key Messages

- Remember the audience:

- Aim for between fifth-grade and high-school level.

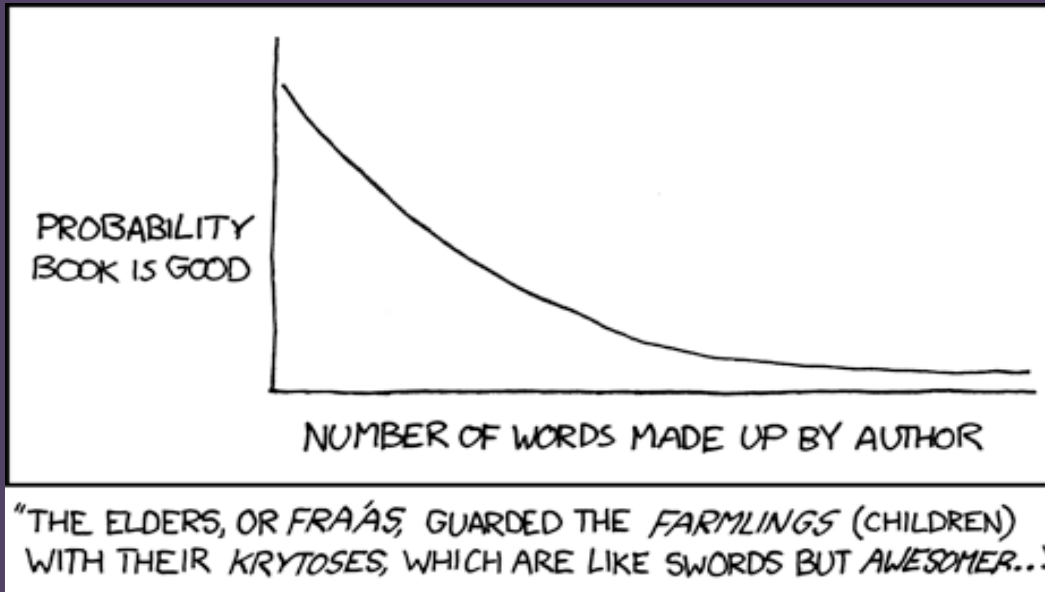
- Explain concepts in a way that shows a connection with the day-to-day life of an average person.



Tips for Preparing Key Messages

Avoid technical or scientific jargon.

- If you must use a scientific term, explain what it means.
- Avoid abbreviations or acronyms.



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"If you don't get your message straight, the reporter certainly won't."

—Lee Frelich, forest ecologist

Leiserowitz et al. 2010

The Language to Use

Terms that have different meanings for scientists and the public

Scientific term	Public meaning	Better choice
enhance	improve	intensify, increase
aerosol	spray can	tiny atmospheric particle
positive trend	good trend	upward trend
positive feedback	good response, praise	vicious cycle, self-reinforcing cycle
theory	hunch, speculation	scientific understanding
uncertainty	ignorance	range
error	mistake, wrong, incorrect	difference from exact true number
bias	distortion, political motive	offset from an observation
sign	indication, astrological sign	plus or minus sign
values	ethics, monetary value	numbers, quantity
manipulation	illicit tampering	scientific data processing
scheme	devious plot	systematic plan
anomaly	abnormal occurrence	change from long-term average

—From Sommerville and Joy, *Physics Today*, 2011:

http://www.physicstoday.org/resource/1/phtoad/v64/i10/p48_s1?bypassSSO=1

Tips for Preparing Sound Bites

What is a sound bite?

“A way to communicate your message in short, quotable form for print or broadcast media”

—*A Scientist’s Guide to Talking to the Media*

A good sound bite follows the same essential guidelines as message preparation:

Keep it simple.

Remember your audience.

Avoid or explain jargon.

With just that little bit extra...

What Is That Little Bit Extra?

It's memorable! Surprising, catchy, humorous, or sobering

“Reporters need a summary quote that captures some of the field’s interest in a topic, but delivers it forcefully.”

—Dan Vergano, science reporter for *USA Today*

“These are enormous geological events. Earth doesn’t do this very often. Something about the size of these things shakes you to the very core.”

—Brian Atwater, U.S. Geological Survey, talking about the December 2004 tsunami

“They are like the buttresses of the high cathedral. If you remove the buttress, the cathedral will collapse.”

—Jose Rial, University of North Carolina geophysicist, talking about the Greenland Ice Sheet slipping away.

“I thought, wow, this was a gold mine.” —Ray Huey, University of Washington, talking about global warming data seen in fruit flies.

Common Questions from Journalists

- What is the main result/finding?
- Why should we/anyone care?
 - What are the possible implications of the result?
 - Is it an important result?
 - Who could benefit from this research?
- Are you the first person to look at this?
 - If not, what is novel about this research?
- What is exciting or interesting about this research? (A quote getter)

Common Questions: One Layer Deeper

- Couldn't that result be due to x, y, or z?
 - How do you know that the result is due to what you think it is due to?
- Who disagrees with this result?
 - On what basis?
 - What do you think about their arguments?
- People connect this result with phenomenon X:
 - What are your thoughts on this?
 - Who else should we ask about this?

Other Information to Have in Your Tool Kit

Images: Of yourself (Preferably in the field)
Of the equipment you use

Links to your research: NOAA/CIRES site
Research publications
Talks you have given/videos
Previous media coverage

Related links: Similar research
Background explanation
Relevant state or federal sites

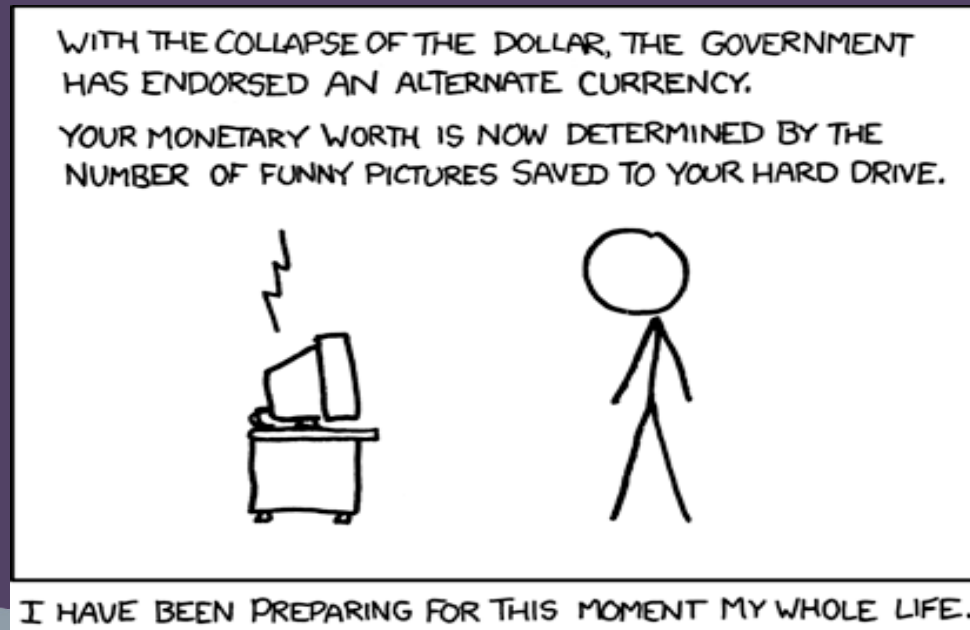
People to contact: Who will support your work?
Experts in the field

Acing the Interview: Before the Interview

Prepare: Hope for the best; prepare for the worst.

Key points:

- Prepare.
- Control when you are interviewed
 - Even if they are on a deadline ask them to call back in 10-15 minutes
- Investigate the goal of the interview: Ask them questions first.



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Investigate the Goal of the Interview

Determine the goal of the interview so you can prepare yourself.

- What news outlet do you work for?
- Who is your audience?
- What is your deadline?
- What is your angle for this story?
- Whom else have you talked to?
- Is the interview live or taped and edited (for broadcast interviews)?
- Are you recording this interview?

—excerpted from *A Scientist's Guide to Talking to the Media*

During the Interview: The Basics

Use the same basic principles as you would when preparing sound bites.

- Keep it simple.
- Keep your audience in mind.
- Avoid jargon.

Also:

- Keep answers short.
- Be friendly but professional.
- Never guess (if you are unsure about a fact, tell the reporter that you will check and get back to him or her).

“Talk to reporters as if they are students interested in the subject but requiring lots of information.”

—Oceanographer Jed Fuhrman



During the Interview: Controlling the Flow

Stick to your main messages.

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat.

Find every opportunity to repeat your main message so they know it is important.

Use “bridging” to stay on course.

If you get asked questions far afield from those you want to discuss, answer them as quickly as possible, and then get back to your main talking points.

During the Interview: Apply Caution



Reframe questions if necessary.

- Rather than accepting the premise of a poorly framed question, reframe it.

Question: Can global warming be blamed for a particular hurricane, heat wave, fire, or flood?

- A simple “no” does not respond to the essence of the question.

Reframe the question: Is global warming having an influence on such events?

- You can reframe such questions to explain that global warming may be increasing the chances of such events occurring, and you can also explain some of the connections.

During the Interview: Apply Caution



You don't have to answer all the questions.

Be prepared how to not answer questions in your “no-go” areas.

You don't have to know all the answers.

Be prepared to say you don't know the answer.

Even better, refer them to a specialist in a particular area.

They can't quote you on what you haven't said.

Ending the Interview

Ask the reporter questions to make sure that:

They have your main message clear.

They understand what you have told them.

Ask if you can (or offer to) review a draft of the article:

Many/Most will not do this, BUT they may submit technical passages for your review to ensure accuracy.

“Offer to review anything the reporter writes for accuracy and completeness, without implying or exerting control over content (some reporters will welcome this, some will absolutely refuse to do so.)”

— Wildlife biologist Warren Aney

If the Story Comes Out With Flaws

Let the reporter know straight away:

To get a correction.

So they don't make the same mistake again.

If you are unsatisfied with the reporter's response:

Go up the chain of command until you get a satisfactory response.



Enlist Our Help



“Off the Record” and “For Background Only”



Problems:

These terms can mean different things to different media outlets.
It is just an informal agreement.

Our advice:

Only say what you are comfortable with being on record.

If it seems necessary to speak “off the record”:

Reach an agreement with the reporter as to what the terms mean for this interview.

**

**IF YOU FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE
CONDITIONS, DECLINE THE INTERVIEW**

What to Do Now

- Craft your message:
 - Main message
 - Three or four submessages/themes
- Prepare sound-bite answers to the top-eight media questions.
- Think of the worst questions you could be asked, and prepare for them.



The Take-Home Message

It all comes down to intelligent, informed preparation:

“The bottom line is: In all your interactions with the press — whether it is an interview with a general assignment reporter at your local newspaper or a top science journalist at one of the nation’s leading media outlets — you should know beforehand what you want to say and how you are going to say it. That way, reporters will use the quotes you want them to use.

They are just waiting for you to give them something good.”

—From *A Scientist’s Guide to Talking to the Media*,
Richard Hayes and Daniel Grossman