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The Media: Helping Journalists Use and Interpret Your Research

> "I am looking for something I can only call companionship: other people who are, like me, trying to understand what the hell is going on here, in the society or societies we find ourselves embedded in" – Journalist and *New York Times* best-selling author, Barbara Ehrenreich

Companionship is not the word that comes to mind when most researchers imagine interfacing with members of the media. Yet, journalist and former *New York Times*' columnist, Barbara Ehrenreich's (2007) word choice in her "Journalist's Plea" articulates exactly how I have felt about dozens of exchanges with reporters. These encounters with journalists left me feeling invigorated, curious about new questions, and gratified to have spent time thinking together with another human being about things I care deeply about. Invariably, I would have liked to changed small, non-essential details afterward. But nine times out of ten, I have enjoyed and benefited from the story that resulted—for instance by garnering wider readership of my scholarship and further opportunities for public engagement.

Like many academics, I have established my reputation through research that I published in peer-reviewed venues, primarily in journal articles and in a university-press book. And like most academics, I assumed, all along, that the knowledge I labored hard to produce would somehow "filter down" to other members of society who could use it. However, toward the end of graduate school, it dawned on me that such filtering down was not guaranteed (Schalet, 2016). Luckily, I happened upon opportunities to interface with professionals and media specialists, and I started doing presentations for health practitioners and researchers. Over time, those presentations, coupled with interviews with print media and radio reporters, one single, high-stakes TV interview, and half a dozen opinion editorials and general audience articles, have enabled me to share my research with parents, educators, providers, policymakers, and shapers of our culture. There have been many benefits to going down this road: a greater sense of purpose and satisfaction with my profession, new perspectives on my area of expertise, current, often unpublished, policy and public health developments, new research questions, and different potential opportunities for research funding.

But it has not been a straightforward path. Few of the skills and networks I needed to accomplish these forms of engagement were part of my disciplinary socialization. Even after gaining such skills through unanticipated opportunities as a post-doctoral fellow, I have found that intensive media engagement is met with ambivalence in the academic community. Much as it welcomes positive attention, the university does not have an incentive structure to reward excellence in media dissemination; and getting research into the media, and doing it right, takes time and is not accounted for in typical measures of faculty productivity. Sometimes peers look admiringly at us, but sometimes they look askance and question the seriousness of our scholarly commitments. Still, the work is more than worth it. We owe it to tax payers who foot the bill for our grant dollars. We owe it to our democracy to help inform public dialogue. And along the way, some of us will be fortunate to find like-minded academic colleagues, who are willing to support each other in engaged scholarship, such as those with whom I co-founded the Public Engagement Project at the University of Massachusetts Amherst which I currently direct (see Introduction; Additional Resources). In this chapter, I draw on our challenges and victories, to detail the lessons that I have learned about conceptualizing media encounters, the rules of the game, the importance of preparation *and* improvisation, and dealing with tricky issues. I believe these lessons are relevant to social and behavioral scientists from many disciplines, indeed to scientists across the board.

What Is It that We're Doing When We Engage the Media?

While many of us admire famous public intellectuals, when it comes to doing this work ourselves, researchers are often wary of entering the fray. One reason is that we're often a bit suspicious of the motivations of the parties involved: researchers who self-promote and betray their craft by over-simplifying, journalists who misquote or distort by taking words out of context, and editors who cut crucial information or lead with faulty titles. Rather than be guided by the specter of mutual misunderstanding and misuse of information, we might envision exchanges with journalists and editors as, ideally, *mutually enriching dialogues*. Not only do these dialogues give us the opportunity to share knowledge with audiences beyond the academy; they also give us the opportunity to *learn from them* about new angles on our topic. We might think of preparing for these exchanges as akin to preparing for conference presentations. Just as we have all had to learn the rules of the game to create gratifying conference presentations—getting the format, length, and content right—creating a satisfying encounter with the popular media requires an understanding of its structure. As we start out, we mostly play by the rules of its game; yet once we've mastered the rules, we can also improvise and really have fun with it.

Rule of the Game 1: No Time Like the Present

Although the best of scholarship and journalism have much in common—curiosity, willingness to ask hard questions, and craftsmanship in using language to answer those questions—the practitioners of each craft work in different universes. Learning to successfully bridge the cultures of these professions requires the ability to manage those differences, which I believe center around two rules of the game. The first one pertains to *time*. Borrowing again from

Barbara Ehrenreich as she characterizes journalism and sociology, I would like to share a sentence that I believe pertains to scholarship more generally: “If there is a single crucial difference, it is in the two professions’ relationship to time” (p. 231). Indeed, a scholar “can burrow in her office for years with a single project; a journalist usually has hours, days, or at best a few weeks in which to absorb a body of material and fashion it into a sharply pointed, communicable form” (Ehrenreich, 2007, pp. 231–232. Ehrenreich’s words will not come as a surprise to researchers who have interfaced with media. We know the seemingly unreasonable time demands from journalists, who contact us with questions and requests for responses within days, sometimes within hours.

But it is worth considering for a moment the perspective of a journalist on this time bind: She can never, writes Ehrenreich (citing Walter Benjamin) “step out of the ‘storm’” of rapidly changing news. Eager to get it right, and to acknowledge the complexity of the matter, but with extremely limited time to do that, journalists like Ehrenreich approach scholars with a kind of hopeful “neediness”: “You, we figure, have had the time to comb through the data and reflect on the results.” While they have some tried and true colleagues in academia, journalists often have no way to know who the real experts are. Even when they do, their calls often go unanswered. Ehrenreich recalls the spring of 2014, when Bill Cosby was spouting tirades against poor African Americans. She was desperate to locate a researcher to demonstrate what she, correctly, suspected was the erroneous nature of Cosby’s accusations. Ehrenreich did locate such a researcher who responded quickly – and with the journalistic gold: a “succinct ‘expert’ quote.” Yet, she could not help but be disappointed: Why was this expert not proactive? When she asked him to write an op-ed and offered to help place it, he demurred: “He was too busy, maybe in a few weeks. Well, in a few weeks it might be too late. Cosby's accusations would have blown through the collective consciousness without refutation" (Ehrenreich, 2007, pp. 232-233).

The unrealized potential of researchers to contribute to the common good and drive important decisions is nothing short of a tragedy—and the misinformation run amok, a travesty. But the only way to confront the time bind in which journalists and academics find themselves is to understand and respect both. We cannot nor should we change the essential differences between academic and journalistic time: as researchers, our methodical, plodding, deliberative nature–which leads to our slowness—is our great strength. At the same time, we can keep the slowness with which we – as a general rule of thumb – deliver our results, from getting in our way of efforts to get our research into the media. Here I offer three strategies to honor the journalist's relationship to time, while staying true to ours. In the immediate term: respond and, if necessary, refer out; in the interim: prepare and practice; in the longer term: hook and re-hook.

Respond immediately. I suggest responding swiftly to journalists, even if we do not know whether we want or can help them. A quick email to recognize receipt, and to ask for clarification on the request—what is the journalist's time line, what is their angle on the story, what is he or she ideally looking for—will meet a ground rule for potential "companionship", and do so without making any commitment. Responding rapidly, regardless of what one can offer, is particularly important for journalists who must make immediate decisions about whether to keep looking for an expert. An initial email response will give them information with which to make those next decisions. But it also can benefit you: you win time to decide what to do. You can also solicit information that can help you make your decision, and if need be, you (or perhaps your university news office) can do a quick background check on the legitimacy of the reporter and news outlet in question. By responding fast to that first email a reporter sends us, we are able to establish the basis for a relationship that can lead to better media opportunities later on—even when we say "no, not now," or "no, not me" in the present. Sometimes, we can do something else that costs us little, but is very valuable for the reporter: refer to another expert or give factual information over email without having to go "on record."

To illustrate, recently, I was contacted by a reporter to explain a trend in adolescent sexual health. In his interview request, the reporter led me to suspect that his operating assumptions were inaccurate, and his assumptions had the potential to misinform policymaking. Someone had to set him straight, but I did not have the time, or published facts to do so in print. I referred the reporter to a research institute I knew had the expertise to communicate carefully about a politically contentious issue. Meanwhile, I shared with him—off the record—my best understanding of the current status of knowledge on the issue. He expressed gratitude for the referral and for my correction, assuring me he would not quote me. Similarly, I was asked recently by a reputable, national TV station to comment on a particularly controversial issue. The producer was persuasive and almost convinced me to say yes, in spite of my gut feeling that I neither knew the necessary literature to comment wisely, nor had the time to beef up on it. After mulling it over for two days, I said no. My University news office was disappointed, but the producer respected my decision. She even promised to be back in touch in the future for a segment on adolescent sexuality right in my wheel house. There are times to go out on a media limb, and I have done so. But neither of these opportunities were limbs on which I wanted to go. By responding swiftly, considering the request, and referring to colleagues when I said no, I showed goodwill and built relationships that had the potential to generate future opportunities.

Prepare and practice. It is essential that we prepare and practice before going "on record." As many a scholar seeking to reach non-academic audiences will attest, the effort we put into mastering public communications will return its value in kind, first and foremost by forcing us to clarify our thinking. In a recent article in *The Conversation,* psychologists Jonathan Wai and David Miller (2015) write, for instance, "not only did the process [of writing for the public] improve the quality of our writing, but it also brought more clarity to the way we were thinking about scientific problems." At the Public Engagement Project, I have seen our Faculty Fellows have similar experiences in their media message trainings and even in their conversations with their peers across different disciplines. These experiences force them to become much clearer than they were at the start about what exactly they are thinking.

One way to gain clarity in your thinking, while relating your thoughts to current events, is to practice through the format of op-ed writing. Who has not at some point thought: "My research could really inform that important news story; I'd write an op-ed if those recommendations, lectures, and meetings weren't already filling up my week"? Then once we manage to sit down to draft the op-ed, we find the news cycle has long moved on. Here the problem runs deeper than the difference between academic and journalistic time tables. For in addition to scheduling and squeamishness, one reason that many of us can't whip up that op-ed when the news needs us, is that we simply do not know how to. We may write for a living, but engaging, complicating and persuading in 900 words is an art onto its own, and one that requires a great deal of practice. When one practices this art well in advance of the moment one might need to act quickly, one has the chance to gain the mastery—and ideally some paragraphs of rough drafts—that make it possible to jump on opportunities that the news cycle may present.

What are the features of the op-ed format? The building blocks are short, active tense sentences, and—this is essential—paragraphs that are one to three, no more than five, sentences. You cannot motivate your point with either theory or method. The point must speak to people's real lives. By the end of the fifth sentence, readers need to see a main argument clearly stated or evocatively foreshadowed. That argument cannot be solely analytic: a short version of an academic analysis explaining a puzzle or an historical contextualization of a modern-day phenomenon. It must contain—explicitly or implicitly—a normative perspective, that is, an argument about what should happen. As researchers, we ground that argument in our best understanding of the evidence, but in the op-ed format, we cannot rely on data to speak for themselves; we must clarify their implications. Lead with concrete examples—stories, metaphors, anecdotes, compelling statistics—and *precede* any analysis and concepts with such concrete examples. Where relevant, speak personally—evoking your experience, emotion, passion and conviction. And the closing is key: always conclude with a strong, unequivocal synthetic statement, driving it home with humor, a sense of heft, or ideally, both.

Hook and re-hook your message. Practicing op-ed writing gives you the opportunity to develop your main media messages, which will stand you in good stead in other kinds of media engagement. But once we're ready, how do we get media attention for our research story? Sometimes, if we're lucky and have a good publicity team (through a university, a journal or press, or other professional PR assistance) our research *is* the news. But generally, the trick is to "hook" our research stories on current events as they emerge both unexpectedly and predictably—in the case of yearly anniversaries, holidays, or the "back-to-school" season, for example. If we have practiced the format of op-ed writing in advance, then we can be in the position to, with little notice, "hook" or wrap a stored-away draft around a current event. "Re-hooking" can happen even after "the" moment has past. My first op-ed came into print that way: After practicing the format of op-ed writing in workshop in the Spring of 2008, the perfect hook for my research on adolescent sexuality presented itself on Labor Day weekend of the same year:

News hit that the party that endorsed so-called "abstinence-only" education had nominated a vice presidential candidate whose seventeen-year-old daughter had been just reported to be pregnant. I seized the moment and sure enough, within days a national newspaper accepted my op-ed draft.

But just as we were finalizing details for publication, Lehman Brothers announced its bankruptcy. Sarah Palin's daughter was no longer news and publication of my op-ed was delayed week after week. I thought my moment had come and gone when in early October, after a cringe-worthy vice presidential debate, a colleague suggested I "re-hook" my op-ed around the question about sex education missing from the debate. I went home, rewrote the first paragraph, and sent an email to the newspaper editor suggesting the new hook. A few days later, The Washington Post printed, "A question for Sarah Palin." The truth is that most problems, whether we're taking about sex education, racial stereotypes or climate change, and the demand for our expertise are not transient. Chances are that if the expert Ehrenreich consulted did write that op-ed after a few weeks, he would not have been able to place it then. But he would have drafted facts and arguments in a piece he could have quickly "re-hooked" on current events in the future.

Rule of the Game 2: Tell a Story

If the first rule of the game pertains to understanding and finding ways to reconcile–if not perfectly synchronize – the academic and journalistic relationship to time, the second rule of the game pertains to mastering the format in which to communicate knowledge journalists can use. What is the format that makes our knowledge usable to reporters? Leading science communication specialist, Nancy Baron answers that question succinctly in her 2010 book, *Escape from the Ivory Tower: A Guide to Making your Science Matter.* "Tell me a Story: What Journalists Want from You," is the title of the chapter instructing researchers on how to overcome the typical "clash of cultures" between academia and journalism. Similar calls come from publicly engaged scholars within the academy. Psychologist Steven Pinker (2014) has urged scholars to abandon the often unnecessary contortions of conventional academic prose and embrace idiom. Likewise, historian and *New Yorker* contributor, Jill Lepore (as cited in Nelson, 2016), calls on scholars to tell stories, which, Lepore believes, can communicate arguments; stronger yet, unlike conventional academic argumentation, stories make people care about arguments.

But before we tackle the question of how exactly to turn facts and arguments into stories, we need to consider a more elementary problem: how to answer a question in a way that our responses do not inadvertently become a mini-lecture. Again, insight into the limitations under which editors and journalists operate can help us deliver our knowledge in quotes that potentially usable to them and satisfying to us. Unlike our writings which typically comprise many thousands of words, most news articles must make their point in 600 to 1200 words. Public radio interviews typically allow for the most air-time, and television interviews often for the least. At the one end of the spectrum are the very tight constraints when reporters must obtain one- or two-minute clips for television, or insert one, at most two, succinct quotes into a story. At the other end of the spectrum, reporters for public radio and affiliates might be able to interview at their leisure (20 to 30 minutes) because interviews are pre-recorded and answers can be edited if they are too long. Even then, it is often in one's best interest to keep answers relatively brief and let the reporter chime in regularly and ask questions. The exceptions to the rule, I have found, is when you're being interviewed for stories that specifically focus on your research, or when you sense a synergy with the reporter; in these cases, I will let myself speak longer before pausing–a couple of paragraphs rather than a couple of sentences.

In other words, we need to learn how to tell a story for an audience who, unlike our students, don't need a grade that depends on deciphering fifty minutes of twists and turns. Our stories—and the moral of those stories—need to be conveyable in a reporter's paragraph. How can we do that without sacrificing the integrity of scholarship and the scientific process? As suggested above, the first rule is to be crystal clear on what we think. With clarity, it becomes easier to choose that one personal story and select those one or two statistics that exemplify the core of our message. It also becomes much easier to leave out the trappings of our professional training—the methodological and theoretical contributions, and the hedging of the exact claims in our work. We start with the main finding and its significance, and add context later, as needed, rather than vice versa. Indeed, we might heed the words of George Balanchine, as he goaded his performers to shine in their fullest: "What are you saving it for? Do it now." Leading with our key message, however, is not enough. We have to make it come alive for our intended audience. It should speak directly and in some tangible way to the concerns, questions, and realities of their world—whether they be policymakers, parents, or practitioners (Schalet, Tropp & Troy, in preparation). For some researchers, making the message come alive is easy: qualitative researchers are usually adept at linking abstract analyses with concrete instances. Quantitative researchers might use anecdotes from their everyday life or study participants to illustrate general principles. Researchers who study things, not people, can also tell compelling stories; for example, physical chemist Scott Auerbach advised: "See how stories are created and how hooks are written. Notice how the story is about human problems, with technology as a means to an end, but the story is ultimately not about technology" (personal communication, September 20, 2016).

Adept story tellers goad academic scholars to employ all the weapons in their arsenal, including metaphor, humor, idiom, catchy questions, and emotion (Baron, 2010; Pinker, 2014). Here, it is worth addressing the concern that using such weapons could violate the impartiality required for the scientific process. It need not. That said, a good research story does usually imply a "call to action," and it is worth our taking time to consider the practical implications of our message. In my experience communicating with non-academic publics and guiding others to do the same, I have found that scholars do best when they decide what implications they can stand behind, and then practice stating practical or policy implications clearly and concisely. Doing so increases the likelihood that a reporter will tell the story that you are hoping she or he will. If you are not clear about the implications of your message, others' dictates may well stick with readers or viewers longer than will your words. And though it takes practice, it is certainly possible to at once exercise caution and respect for the scientific process *and* articulate takeaway messages that readers and viewers can use in their lives (Schalet et al., in preparation).

Preparing for the Interview

With greater clarity about the content and implications of your message, you will be better equipped to share your expertise with journalists and reporters. One of the best ways to prepare for speaking with reporters is to regularly speak about your research with non-academics, or at least those who do not share your discipline. Sadly, it is possible to successfully graduate from a Ph.D. program, gain tenure, and become a full professor without ever having been required to communicate about research with anyone other than peers. Not surprising, then, we find ourselves either without words, or overly wordy, when first trying to talk about the general significance of what we do—not an ideal way to go on air. The good news is that it is often quite easy to set up a "gig" speaking about one's research to non-academics. There are myriad professional and practitioner organization eager to learn from research specialists about topics related to their programs and practice. A local library or public school might also be eager to line up a speaker from a nearby university. Cross-professional, community, and even interdisciplinary speaking opportunities can help clarify our thinking and interrupt our normal, jargon-laden speech. Beyond allowing us to hone our presentation skills, these encounters with new audiences—inside and outside of academia—will often give us perspectives on our research that can strengthen our mastery of the field. Particularly when audiences have their own source of knowledge about the topic we study, we have much to learn from them.

When I was a freshly minted PhD, I had the good fortune to obtain a postdoc in a medical school. There, I learned that I needed to say much less than I was accustomed to in my sociology training to convince my medical colleagues that my research was legitimate. But I had to say much more than I learned in sociology about how my research in the area of adolescent sexuality might pertain to other concrete issues. In particular, I had to learn to speak to my new colleagues' questions about how my research showing that normalizing conversations between adults and teens to promote adolescent sexual health could help inform their practice—from office décor, to patient intake, to grant proposals. At first, I had little to say about those things and took my cues from my colleagues who enthusiastically suggested how they might change protocols, hang new posters, and frame their research questions for funding agencies. Eventually, I learned from them, and many others at conferences to which I would later be invited to speak, to use this dialogue to think *together* about how to responsibly extrapolate from what I knew to what *we* might know and do. I also learned a great deal of relevant information that enhanced my expertise, and familiarized me with the consensus and cutting edge research in allied fields, such as public health and psychology.

All of this stood me in good stead for writing opinion editorials for national newspapers years later, and for responding without a blink of an eye to a CNN interviewer's question about Gardasil (the vaccine protecting against HPV and cervical cancer). My ability to respond was certainly the result of these years of engaging in very beneficial cross-professional dialogue with physicians (see also chapter by Penner, this volume). Indeed, my experience certainly confirmed the Barbara Ehrenreich's other point in her "Journalist's Plea", namely that none of the great problems we face in society today are the purview of one discipline, and that to speak knowledgably about these problems, we do well to take note of what our colleagues in allied disciplines are saying. This does not mean spending years becoming an interdisciplinary scholar, though becoming an adept public communicator does, I believe, require some time across disciplines and professions, and familiarizing oneself with highly relevant current events.

One's key job, however, when preparing for a media appearance is not to gather more information. The formidable challenge is to shrink down what one already knows into three to five main points one decides to make. Those main points cannot have additional codicils, like an "a," "b," or "c". Instead, these talking points should be able to stand on their own and be ones that you know by heart before conversing with a reporter. You might find it useful to think of these talking points as the things you want to make sure to have said, the mental checklist to go down, when a reporter ends by asking, "Is there anything else readers should know?" For me, it is the security blanket that gives me the freedom to think and talk on my feet, and do so creatively. Off camera, talking points can be printed out and in one's full view. On camera, with the pressure of a short, live recording, knowing your talking points by heart gives you the confidence that, amidst angst, there are a few important things you really do know for sure.

Unless the news story itself is a scientific breakthrough of a highly technical nature (which is rare in social science), theory and method have no place in talking points. Moreover, researchers are under no obligation to have their talking points cover all the main points of their journal article, book, or even the abstract, in question. It is perfectly permissible to leave out key parts of the theoretical argument, as long as one does not leave out information that could result in mischaracterization of the findings, or to misleading conclusions. In other words, it is possible that we will leave out some of the things that most interest us about our research when communicating with publics that do not have the time or context to understand what intrigues us in relation to scholarly conversations. For it is those publics that we must keep in mind when constructing our talking points: Although we do want to establish rapport, our job is not to make the reporter happy. Our job is to communicate what we think is important for the consumer of the media to know. When preparing talking points, ask yourself questions like, what should a parent of a teenager take away from this, a young person, a teacher, a pediatrician, a policy maker, or even a voter? Ideally, the talking points include an action that follows from the knowledge and is doable. For instance, my talking point was about keeping conversations about sex open between parents and teens (CNN, 2011); a colleague in chemistry once focused on limiting total intake of rice and rice products to less than two cups, uncooked, a week (Tyson, 2015).

Finally, preparing for an interview requires practicing how to re-direct and re-frame questions so that you confident about being able to return to *your* points no matter the question. Learning how to "bridge" as some communication experts call this technique does not require you to sound like a politician or a broken record. It is much more akin to taking a question from a student who is coming out of left field, briefly addressing her or his immediate concern before segueing into the answer you believe the student needs to hear. In other words, we can learn to redirect questions we don't want to fully engage in a way that is educational and illuminating, and does not make the reporter (or the viewer or listener) feel ignored or shamed. Many universities have media relations staff people who are willing to help one practice such re-directions; and if one has the funds, it can certainly be useful to employ the services of communication specialists, particularly if they are experienced at working successfully with researchers. In a pinch, a colleague or even a friend can be immensely helpful by asking a few direct and hard mock questions, with a stopwatch in hand.

The Interview

Keep in mind there is no "one" prototypical interview. Speaking to reporters varies by medium, by live or prerecorded taping in the case of radio and TV, and also, importantly, by whether reporters are driven by purely commercial motives or by a set of value commitments to the topic at hand. Interviews also vary depending on whether you are being invited to comment on a current event or whether your work is the news. You want to know beforehand where an interview falls, so that you can plan your talking points accordingly. If it is a high stakes television or radio program, generally you will have a pre-interview, or an informal phone conversation first—sometimes with the person who will be doing the interview, but often with an assistant who will convey to the interviewer what she or he thinks are the most important points. In my experience, unless the person conducting the pre-interview is the same as the person who will be speaking with you on air, there may be little overlap between the pre-interview and the real interview, so it is best not to count on being asked the same questions again.

There are a couple of things you can do right to set the stage for optimal chemistry. A key one involves establishing rapport with the interviewer—and by proxy with the audience. On camera, it is essential to smile and to make eye contact with the interviewer. This is infinitely easier to do in person than in a remote studio, but even in the latter case, try to smile into the camera (and envision an audience of actual people behind the lens). Establishing a connection with the interviewer, before talking, will also ground you in the moment. For on-camera interviews, we should present ourselves at our best: attractive and professional dress, blues or soft tones, without distracting prints, are ideal. If you are being filmed on-site, you will likely have the opportunity to be groomed and made up by professionals. When filmed off-site, you might consider going to a professional groomer or getting help with make-up. For radio, interviews will typically require a trip to the closest professional broadcasting facilities. I try to arrive at least fifteen minutes early to become accustomed to the room, test the microphone, read over my notes, take a few deep breaths, and do a few stretches. I prefer to stand for radio interviews, as I find it easier to breathe deeply from the belly, which can help steady nerves, and because standing makes me feel more confident than speaking into a microphone while seated.

For interviews that are anything other than live recordings, it can be helpful to establish several things beforehand. Specifically, you want to know whether the interview is being recorded or if the reporter will be taking notes from which she will be re-constructing quotes. In the latter case, you want to be especially careful to speak somewhat slowly and pausing regularly. You will also want to know whether you will be allowed to look at the story before it is published. Generally that will not be the case, but sometimes reporters will allow you to read portions of the story and, importantly, to verify and fact-check your quotes. Some reporters are, understandably, averse to showing stories or even quotes to their sources before they are published, because the latter might be tempted to change what they said after a story has been written and has moved through editorial process. That said, news outlets are very sensitive about getting factual information absolutely current and correct, and if they don't and you let them know, they will place corrections after publication, which every journalist wants to avoid.

My experience is that if you are speaking with a reporter who is a professional—and is either neutral or sympathetic toward the research you're sharing—and if you have distilled and reiterated your message, the news stories will accurately reflect your main findings and insights. However, specifics can inadvertently get lost in translation, especially when we get technical. Try to use language or visual aids to clarify statistics, so that there can be no misunderstanding about what a given percentage or proportion refers to; for instance, "two out of three' is better than "67 percent." During or at the end of the interview, you can also ask the reporter to tell you what he or she is taking away from what you've said so far, and double-check that what he or she has taken in is what you have meant. Education professor Walter Secada (personal correspondence) advised academics to follow up interviews with a short e-mail restating main takeaways and to post a short summary of the research on one's webpage for anyone wanting to verify the research conclusions.

In my interviews, I have frequently encountered two challenges—related to causality and controversy—which can lead to misinterpretation and mischaracterization of one's research. To illustrate how I have addressed these challenges, I draw on my CNN interview. As a social scientist, I was trained to be very careful around making so-called "causal" statements—in other words, statements that assert that one thing in the social world leads to another. Imagine my horror when I showed up to the CNN green room (where you are left to wait and stew in your nerves once you've been made up and groomed) at eight am on the Friday after Christmas, and heard the CNN news caster, cheerfully state: "Do Teen Sleepovers Prevent Pregnancy: One Researcher Says Yes and Explains Why." My book, *Not Under My Roof: Parents, Teens and the*

Culture of Sex, about which I was shortly be interviewed, centers around the practice of parents permitting teenage couples to sleep together at home in the Netherlands, a country, where the teen birth rate is one of the lowest in the world. The causal story is complex, and I knew I could easily waste my five precious minutes detailing why the title the editors chose was incorrect. Instead, I waited for the right opportunity during the interview to state simply that *many* things contribute to the low Dutch teenage birthrates, including a much lower poverty rate in the Netherlands than in the US and better access to healthcare services. The general cultural climate around teenage sexuality that my book highlights also plays a role. After all, when a teenager feels she can confide in a parent and make an appointment with a doctor, she will be more likely to prevent a pregnancy when she starts having sexual intercourse. In short, I was able to correct the inaccurate causal claim, while reaffirming my main message: that open parent-teen communication about sexuality and relationships is paramount for adolescent health.

Similarly, I was prepared for—and therefore able to—deflect a reaction of outrage or possibility of being pigeonholed as a crazy foreigner (I have a Dutch accent) or liberal college professor trying to get parents in the heartland to let their teenage children have sex at home. Indeed, after the camera turned off, the interviewer turned to me and said, "When I first heard about your book, I thought the idea was complete insanity, but now I see that it makes sense." What happened in the interim is that at the first possible opportunity when the interviewer and I met before the cameras went on—which lasted all of sixty seconds—I shook his hand, smiled and locked eyes, inviting him to view me not as a person with crazy ideas, but as a regular human being. And throughout the interview I returned to my main talking points, which had been honed over many conversations with youth-serving professionals, pivoting away from extremity to a simple intuitive message: This is not about sleepovers; it is about parents and teenagers staying connected and kids not feeling a need to sneak around. Parents who have open conversations about sex and romance can better maintain that connection and help their kids stay healthy. As one of my coaches later said gleefully, “By the end of the interview you had him talking like you.”

Conclusion

By drawing on the principles outlined in this chapter, and optimizing our research expertise and pedagogical skills, we can, I believe, accomplish a great deal more in our exchanges with the media than many of us fear. To do so, we must see the interviewer or reporter as a real person to whom we are relating as people. We need to acknowledge and honor their perspective, even as we use our expertise to shift their understanding. We won’t ever tell the whole story, but we can tell the most important part of the story for the audiences we want to reach. Doing so successfully does not require us to stay strictly on one given script. For if we are well prepared, the questions that do come out of left-field can be opportunities to improvise, learn more, and foster a more richly educational media conversation.

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Additional Resources

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