

Advice for Interacting with News Media

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Before you agree to an interview

- 1. Do not do an interview in response to a cold call.** Ask for their information, ask for time to prepare and tell them you'll call back.
- 2. Research the reporter (or ask an institutional public information officer (PIO) to do this).** A Google search will tell you what kind of stories they typically write and help you speak at an appropriate level. You may find they write for a sensational outlet. It's okay to talk to them -- their reach may be broad -- but have a PIO in the room, and record at least your own side of the conversation. (Note: in 13 states and DC it's the law to tell people you're recording them.)
- 3. Prepare.** Have an agenda: 2 to 5 message points. Read -- do a Google News search for recent stories on the topic to see what the reporter may have read. If you're being asked to comment on a paper, read the paper and the press release that was written about it.
- 4. Practice.** If you're inexperienced, ask a PIO to shoot you questions. If you can face a colloquium audience, you can do this.

Random tips for video or TV

- 1. Appearance.** Avoid loud patterns. Stripes are especially bad. Take off badges and lanyards. Ask if there will be a hair and makeup person. If not, do your best on your own and ask someone on the set if you look okay before you begin.
- 2. Bring props.** If there's any relevant prop you can have in your hand, bring it!
- 3. Posture.** Sit on the front half of your chair and sit up straight; this makes you look better, more active. Ask where they want you to look -- at an interviewer, or at the camera? Use your hands when you talk.
- 4. Video conferencing.** Make sure you're well lit. If there's a window in the room, position yourself so the window is in front of you or to one side, not behind you. Place the camera at your eye level so viewers aren't looking up your nose. Use earbuds so there's no echo or feedback. Sit in a quiet place; coffee shops don't work. Don't look at the Skype screen, make "eye contact" with your camera instead.

During the interview

- 1. Respect your audience.** Your audience is the reporter's readers, not the reporter. Don't condescend. Do provide necessary context. Avoid jargon. Do not use acronyms or initialisms. If a reporter's question irritates you, don't let that show -- don't take it out on the audience. Give them an answer that you'd be proud for an audience to hear.
- 2. Speak in soundbites.** Most reporters want to quote you, and to do that, you must answer in a series of standalone sentences. This feels weird because it's not normal conversation, but it's an interview, not a conversation. It's okay to pause to collect your thoughts. State your key point up front, and make it a complete sentence that makes it clear what the question was. Try to keep your sentences short and clear; don't ramble. Avoid using the words "we" or "it" - state the subject each time. If you get lost, acknowledge it, regroup, and say: "What's really important is," and state something from your agenda.
- 3. Avoid speculation.** If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. If appropriate, state how you would try to figure out the answer to the question, or explain why the answer is unknowable. Or offer to connect the reporter with someone else with expertise. Whatever you do, don't lie.
- 4. If you don't understand a question, don't answer it.** Either ask for the question to be rephrased, or:
- 5. Bridge to your agenda.** "I'm not sure about that, but what I can tell you is..."
- 6. There's no such thing as "off the record."** Don't say anything you wouldn't want to see in a newspaper. If you do, and it gets published, it's your fault.

Follow up

Thank the reporter for their interest and ask them for a link to the article/show when it's posted. Offer to respond by email to clarify any points of confusion. Jot down a few notes on your experience for your own records, and share those notes with your PIO. Most reporters will not send you their story in advance, but you can offer to fact-check and see what happens.