

# **Someone Wants to Talk to Me About My Science! What do I do?!?**

By Martin Hajovsky (Recovering Journalist)

So a reporter wants to talk to you about your science. Amid the bundle of nerves you might be feeling, remember, this is very good news, for you, for your institution and for your field.

As a scientist, you also get to be a full-blown science communicator. The thing about the communications racket of course is that everyone knows how to do it, but not everyone thinks they do. This is especially odd because if they tell you they can't communicate a message, then by definition they are actually contradicting themselves.

I mean, we all talk right? Those of us that can, that is. We all can ask questions, issue requests, give answers, order a pizza.

The problems seem to occur when you switch modalities. I can tell you about that piece of paper on the ground over there. But maybe I feel like I can't write to you about it. Or freeze utterly when telling an audience of 40,000 people in a stadium about it. Or describe it to that guy I've been idolizing all my life.

This is despite the fact that that piece of paper is sitting on the ground, all crumpled up, right. Over. There.

This is highly usual. Study after study shows that people fear death far less than they fear public speaking, and speaking to a reporter or reporters is public speaking. Pretty much all of you at some point will have to talk before an audience about your work. In all likelihood, talking about your work to an audience is NOT why you got into this gig, but here you are.

So, here are 10 points to remember about print interview and interview requests. Most of this also applies to TV/radio/podcast interviews, so adapt as needed to those situations:

1. If you get contacted for an interview, Job No. 1 is to refer the journalist to your institution's Public Affairs Office if you have one. They may not want to talk to the PAO if they're already talking to you. In all likelihood they are in a hurry. But there's a right way to go about this, and that right way is to include your PAO from the beginning. After you hang up with the journalist, call the PAO yourself.
2. Always make sure you remember at the beginning of the interview to get the person's name and direct contact number, preferably a cell number, and make certain they have yours. They should give their contact info to you anyway, but we're all in a rush in this modern world, and sometimes we skip over the basics. I guarantee you that very soon after you hang up with the interviewer or they walk out of your office, you will think of one more thing you wanted to say, or a different way to say it. If you do not have the reporter's contact info, this is the point you will regret it (often accompanied by choice expletives).
3. Stay calm. This is a collegial situation that can help you, your institution and the journalist who is contacting you. Sometimes these things can turn adversarial. There is every reason for them to remain collegial, however. You are a highly trained professional who wants to come across well, but so is that journalist. This is the foundation of your first piece of common ground with that journalist.
4. Are you nervous? Join the club. Most people are nervous when they give interviews, but here's the secret, so is that person asking you all of those questions. That interviewer in all likelihood does not know what you know, and when you speak, they might just be lost in information. No one likes that feeling, least of all a person who is going to have to write this all down for a story in a few hours, no matter how curious and interested they may be. Many journalists have science backgrounds, but most do not. (That's OK, you probably don't have a journalism background either.)
5. Do you know more than this journalist does about your field? Almost certainly. Remember though, that one thing the journalist does have, which is a trait of the profession, is a keen and questioning intellect.

They want to learn. They want to know. That's why they're journalists. Talk to this person as you would a curious student or interested family member (preferably one you like). Journalists are trained to ask questions if they don't understand something, and they should, but sometimes not everyone is at their best. Help the person out. Stop from time to time to make sure they haven't gotten lost in the woods. Speak kindly and clearly, and you will be amazed how well this conversation can go.

6. Oh no! It has become adversarial! Now what do I do? First, thank your lucky stars that you brought in the PAO's office from the beginning (again, if your institution has one). They are very good at what they do. Let them know this is not going well, and get them to intervene. If they're in the room, they more than likely know that already. PAOs are your guardian angels.
7. You didn't include the PAO from the beginning? Not OK, but not a disaster (yet). Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You can stop it at any time. If an interviewer is getting adversarial, end the interview. In this bad scenario, the next step is to call the PAO (performing a mea culpa for not including them already, with brownies/cookies preferably), and tell them what happened. They'll take care of the situation from there.

Does your institution not have a PAO? Well, this is not ideal, but also not a disaster. This is going to mean that you will have had to take some additional steps before the interview. In addition to the journalist's contact info, you should get their editor's name and contact info. If you had to cut off the interview for negative reasons, for your sake that editor needs to know ASAP, and unfortunately, you are the one that's going to have to do that work. Don't be silent! Tell your department head. Tell other department heads as well. Fortunately, while this can happen, it is a minority of instances.

8. One of the biggest worries people have when they give an interview is that they'll then pick up the article, read it and think, "That's not what I said." or "I don't remember saying that." or "That's not what I meant." In my experience, people frequently do not remember exactly what they said in an interview. It's very possible you did say what you didn't think you said, or you said one thing, but meant something crucially dissimilar. Nerves can play funny tricks on memory.

However, the good news is that with a little forethought, you can prepare for this eventuality beforehand. You can assume right out that no reporter will give you final edit over the article being written. That responsibility (curse?) falls to the writer's own editor. However, you can lay out certain ground rules for the interview beforehand. One is that you get to review any quote you give. This is a completely reasonable ground rule. You are not editing their work, you are making sure that you are saying what you intend to say. Tell the reporter to play back your quotes. If they're taking notes, have the reporter read you back what they wrote down about what you said. Then review/revise as necessary. If you feel the need, write down and/or record your quotes yourself in the presence of the reporter. Then you both have a written record of what was said. (Years from now, you'll find that record and have a great laugh.) To put this in a slightly cynical fashion, that journalist does not want any mistake to appear in an article that bears their byline. (And if there is one, they certainly don't want it to be theirs.) They want the story to be right and to be readable not only because they want to be good at their jobs, but also because that way, they get to go on being journalists. Reviewing/revising quotes with you is part of that quest for accuracy.

9. If you still have a bad feeling about the interview after it's all concluded, your preparation will be key as to what to do next. Talk about your concerns to the PAO (if you have one) or the journalist's editor (if you don't) or the journalist. See if this doesn't allay your fears.
10. All went well. Hooray! Enjoy the fame and accolades that come with having your expertise displayed for the whole world to see. With a few choice preparations, and with your collegial engagement in the interview process, this is exactly what should (and in most cases will) happen.

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