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How to talk to journalists: Best practices for academics

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Academics are not taught how to talk to journalists and most of our expertise in this area is self-taught or implicit. This document shares our best practices for interfacing with journalists.

The first part of the document deals with [print or digital journalists](#), which are by far the most common. The second part deals with [television, radio, and podcasts](#), which are a little bit different.

Print/Digital

To get started, we provide a step-by-step guide on how the process works:

1. Generally, a journalist will send you an email that says something like: “I got your name from Shannon McGregor. I’m a reporter at Vox writing a story about Ben Shapiro’s new podcast, *Men’s Great Ideas*, which is #1 on Spotify. I’d like to know why you think it’s so popular and what it says about the changing face of podcasts more generally. I’m on deadline so want to talk to you today or tomorrow, are you available for a call? (111) 222-3333, Jane Doe.”
2. You reply with your availability. You can always just call back to avoid an endless cycle of availability emails! You should also ask what their timeline/deadline is, so you can get a sense of whether you have the bandwidth to do an interview.
3. The call: This lasts a minimum of 20 minutes, but can go on for up to an hour if the conversation goes well. They will ask you whatever questions they have in mind and you’ll answer.
4. Days, weeks, or even months pass, and the story is published (with or without your quote). Ideally, the journalist lets you know when the story runs and sends you a link, but this doesn’t always happen.

BEST PRACTICES

Do you want to do it?

- Assess the publication along the lines of ideological bias, legitimacy (is this piece going to be published on a clickbait blog or in the *New York Times*?), and reach (local vs. national). I frequently get asked to comment for student publications; the journalists there are often very inexperienced and may not be good interviewers, but I consider it a form of pedagogy.
- Before talking to the journalist, Google them and read their X/Twitter, BlueSky, etc. Skim a couple of their stories. You might want to find out whether the story they’re proposing is squarely in their beat. For example, are they a Style reporter doing a piece on the fashion of the far right, suggesting they know less about covering white supremacy? Do they responsibly cover issues you care about? What are their normative commitments?

Do you have the bandwidth?

- It's totally fine to turn down media engagements for any reason, which can include "I don't want to do it" or "I'm tired."
 - Can someone else take it? **This is a great opportunity to uplift a friend, junior scholar, or another person whose work needs more attention.**
 - Journalists work on very tight deadlines compared to academics, so be clear about how much time you have and when you'll be able to talk. Turnaround should be the same day or the next day, or else they'll probably move on to someone else. This might not work for you, and that's OK!

The reply email

- If you decide that you want to go ahead with the call, your email back can include the following:
 - **Is this on background?** *Background* means the journalist wants to have a conversation to learn more about the topic but doesn't intend to quote you. Many of us want quotations. However, *talking on background* means you can be more candid, talk about topics that you might not want your name associated with (because you're worried about harassment, for instance), or help shape a narrative. A journalist may start out talking on background and then ask permission for a quote if you say something very interesting or articulate.
 - **Does your story have a specific angle?** What interests you about this topic? Using our hypothetical example above, the journalist might loathe Ben Shapiro and want to write a very critical story of right-wing influencers, or they might want to hold him up as an example of entrepreneurial thought leadership.
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 - Some mainstream journalists won't like the idea that they have an angle, so be tactful—ask them to "tell me a little about the story you're working on." In my experience, they almost always have an angle.
 - **Could you send me the questions or topics of conversation ahead of time?** They won't always have specific questions prepared, but if they do, it gives you some time to prep answers. Journalists don't like it when you have talking points memorized because it can come off as robotic. In my experience, though, it's better to have at least some idea of what you want to say.
- If you don't want to do the interview and/or don't have the bandwidth, it's **courteous to respond anyway**.
 - "I'm so sorry but I'm not available to comment on this story. Good luck with the piece" or "Unfortunately I'm not available, but I highly recommend my colleague Jane Doe, who works on [related area]. Her email is jdoe@awesomeuniversity.edu."

Before the call

- Spend some time thinking about the topic. You might want to read some previous press coverage, skim a few papers, or watch/read/listen to whatever they're asking you to comment on.
- Jot down the main points you want to make ("talking points"). These do not have to be in answer to the questions.

- Points should be short and sweet.
- No citations or jargon.
- Be as clear and pointed as possible.
- Practice the points out loud if this helps.
- Answer the questions, if they were provided. **Feel free to skip questions you don't want to answer or rephrase questions to better convey the angle/point of view you want to emphasize.**

During the call

- **The journalist is not your friend!** Stay on point, and don't let your guard down too much.
- Don't swear or use slang. This isn't for professional reasons but because you may be embarrassed if they quote you using such language. A candid remark might be fantastic for a piece but won't reflect well on you.
- Don't talk too much. Say what you want to say and let them drive the conversation.
- Give the reporter the chance to ask clarification questions and follow-ups.
- If you don't want to answer a question, skip it. You can say something like "I don't feel comfortable or prepared to answer that." Be nice!
- You can *go off the record* if you want to say something that you don't want attributed to you. Say clearly, "I have a comment that is off the record" or "This is off the record."
 - **The journalist doesn't have to respect this if you've determined ahead of time that this call will be on the record, so be careful.** If there's something that might be harmful if it's attributed to you, it's better not to say it.
- If you say something you don't like or aren't comfortable with, say something like "I don't like the way I phrased that. Please scratch that and don't quote me on that."
- Feel free to limit your time if you are busy. You can tell them at the top of the call "I only have 20 minutes," for example, or "I have a hard stop at 3 pm," even if you don't.
- Emphasize your main points. You can do this even if they don't ask a question including these points.
- They will almost always ask, "Is there anything else you think I should know about the topic?" This is a great time to sneak in any talking points that didn't fit elsewhere into the interview. Or, if you have certain pet peeves about how journalists cover the topic, you can throw in some big framing statements. You can even mention other issues you're tracking that might be within the journalist's beat.

After the call

- You probably won't hear from the journalist again. Sometimes, though, it could be the start of a beautiful relationship!
- You **MIGHT** hear from them when the story is published and they send you a link, but most of the time the story is published and they don't tell you. **I have a Google Alert set up for my name which is usually how I find out if the story is live,** or if someone @replies me on X/Twitter.

- In the rarest cases, the journalist works for an extremely reputable publication like the *New Yorker* and they follow up with you days or weeks later to fact-check your information. Sometimes reporters have to fact-check their own stories; be respectful and work with them if they request this.
- **When the story is published, print a copy to PDF, file it away, and add it to a “Public Impact” or “Press Mentions” section on your CV.** Don’t forget to call your besties and brag!
- Worst case scenario: The story is published and you’re not in it, or it’s published and the quote from you is terrible or embarrassing. This happens, but not that often (the first scenario, unfortunately, is more likely). Sometimes stories get cut for length, the editor doesn’t like the angle the reporter takes, or you gave good information but not a pithy quote. Chalk it up to a learning experience.
 - **If the piece has a minor error or clarification, email the reporter and give them a chance to fix it.** “I don’t like the way I sound” isn’t a good reason to do this.
 - Reach out to your support networks if something really bad happens: the journalist misquoted you or you’re getting harassed because of the story. (Again, this is really rare.)

Podcasts, TV/Video, and Radio

Interviews for television, podcasts, and radio are much more challenging than print for several reasons:

- Whether they’re live or pre-recorded, you must be articulate, answer all the questions, even if you haven’t prepared for them, and speak in sound bites. Especially with live television or radio, there’s little room for rambling or incoherence.
- They usually have *very* quick turnaround times, and you might be given a day or two or even less to prepare.
- Television/video requires a professional appearance.

The previous points about crafting talking points are even more important here than in print/digital media. You should have these down before the interview begins.

Here’s how the process works (I’m using live radio for this example):

- You get an email from a producer at a podcast, TV show, radio show, etc. “Hi Professor Marwick, I’m Jane Doe from WKRP Cincinnati. We’re doing a show about TikTok and we’d like to invite you to be a guest on the show. The show is on Monday 10/24 at 7:00 am Eastern Time and your segment would last 2-5 minutes.” (This is for a live show obviously.)
- You reply back with your availability.
- You have a screening call with a line producer who asks you several questions. This is an opportunity for you to find out the show’s angle, but also for them to “audition” you for the show: Are you coherent? Would you be a good guest?
- The producer confirms a date/time, either at the end of the call or via email.
- You prepare and practice your talking points. They usually send you the questions ahead of time, or at least the main topics.

- On the day of the interview, you often have to log into some sort of wackadoo audio/visual platform (not Zoom). In some cases, they will ask you to go into a professional studio to get professional-quality audio. Academic departments—like UNC’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media—may have professional studios available for your use. I’ve used the Hussman studio many times. The producer working on the interview will work with the producer at the studio to figure out the audio/visual. When working with national media, they may ask you to come into a professional studio in whichever major city is closest.
 - Keep in mind that you can always be bumped for breaking news.
- The host usually logs on a minute or two early and says hi. You will hear the previous segment, any interstitials, etc. Then, the interview happens. Usually, they’ll just ask the questions they sent you, but in some cases the host will come at you with questions completely out of left field.
- These interviews go **VERY** quickly!
- At the end, they thank you. Usually, they email you a clip afterward.

The process for live TV is very similar unless you are asked to go into an actual studio or they send a camera crew to your house/office. Nowadays, they usually just film you using your webcam. I’ve done local TV on Facetime on my phone, whereas the *Today Show* sent a camera crew to my house in Chapel Hill—it really depends on the size/budget of the media outlet.

Dressing for television/video

- They will sometimes send you requirements, which usually require no patterns/prints (they look weird on video).
- **A blazer and shirt are always a good combination.** I have several jewel-tone t-shirts (cheap ones from Old Navy) that I wear under a black blazer for TV appearances.
- *This is not the time to serve a look!* Go with simple and professional. I am all about statement fashion but when it goes wrong it goes REALLY wrong and it’s not worth the risk. Avoid large jewelry as it can interfere with microphones and headphones.

Things to consider for television

- **Your Background:** You want something generic but pleasing to the eye. [Room Rater](#) provides many examples. If all else fails, a bookshelf with a plant is always a good option.
- **Your Lighting:** You can invest in a Kim Kardashian-style ring light if you want. Otherwise, move lamps around to get as much light as possible. Front-lit, natural light from a window is the gold standard. Here are some [lighting tips for video calls](#).

Podcast-Specific Considerations

For podcasts or non-live radio interviews, the process is much easier because it’s not live and the podcaster will edit the interview afterward—you can redo your sound bites multiple times (“I didn’t like how that answer

came out, let me rephrase that”).

- Consider your microphone. You may want to try out different headsets, AirPods, etc. Or, you can get a real mic if you’re going to be doing a lot of audio interviews or running a podcast. Sometimes they’ll send you a set of tips for audio recordings. Again, studios housed in academic departments like the one in Hussman at UNC are great places to tape podcasts.
- If you live in a house/apartment with high ceilings, they may ask you to go to a smaller room. There’s a reason a lot of podcasters tape in their closets!
- Podcast interviews can be very long, so you can elaborate at length on your points. However, this also means you have more opportunity to ramble, get off topic, or say something you didn’t intend. Spend a bit more time fleshing out your talking points.

Final Things to Remember

In all these cases, **you have to learn how to convey your ideas using regular language.** How would you explain things to your parents or your best friend from undergrad? This is not about “dumbing down” your ideas but making them *accessible* and getting them out to the public at large.

Avoid jargon, acronyms, and terms that mean something specific in your field of study but something else to a layperson. **Using examples is always good**, especially if they relate to current events. **Metaphors and analogies** are a great way to explain complex or esoteric ideas.

Doing press can be tiring and frustrating, but it is part of public scholarship and one of the best ways to impact public discourse. A lot more regular people will read a newspaper article than an academic paper. Remember: You are an expert and your ideas are valuable!

Resources:

- [Media Training 101](#): Geared toward businesses but provides a very thorough overview of the entire process, from talking points to speaking to working with journalists.
- [Drafting Talking Points for Interviews](#): A detailed guide to putting together talking points. Note: With print interviews, you’ll almost never be asked your talking points ahead of time. This is mostly for radio/television, so the producer can make sure you are an appropriate guest for the show.

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