

Working with Journalists

Engaging with journalists can help build both your reputation and your connection to society by providing relevant information about your research. It is an opportunity to speak up for your own work, serve as a credible source of information, and help others develop a positive outlook about science in general. By cultivating relationships with journalists, you can join the public discussion and help shape the role of science in our world.

Understanding journalists

A journalist's first responsibility is to their audience. They need to make their work relevant, timely and interesting enough to hit the metrics their editors expect, whether that's in sales, clicks or social shares. They work under tight time constraints, often while juggling many different beats and roles. As staff at major newspapers and media outlets continue to shrink, there are fewer traditional science reporters to cover all the great stories out there. The journalist's code of ethics is also stringent: most, if not all, reporters could lose their jobs and professional reputations by sharing a story with sources before it's final and published.

What does a journalist need from you?

- Make yourself available: they often have a quick turnaround/deadline to meet: this means that responding within minutes or hours, instead of days, is important.
- Compelling hook: what's unique about your work, and how is it relevant to the reporter's audience? This will differ by audience: national reporters must see connections with universal values or high-profile trends, while local reporters will be more interested in the regional connection.
- Timely: why is your story important now? How does it connect to a hot topic (or an ever-popular topic) of public conversation?
- Clarity: get to the point and get rid of jargon.
- Human connection: tell a story and make sure you are part of it.

How do you prepare for an interview?

First, decide whether you want to do the interview. Ask yourself if you can meet the deadline, if the particular audience is important, if the news source and reporter are reputable. What is the angle of the story? Who else is being interviewed? It is okay to decline a media request, particularly if you are able to recommend another source for them to contact. Not sure? Contact the Marketing and Communications team at the College of the Environment, who can help you vet the reporter.

Once you've decided to do the interview, get organized. Again, the College is always able to help you prepare through message development, practice interviews and being present for backup support during the interview itself:

- Know your primary message: what's the one thing you want people to remember? If they only take one quote from you, what would you want that quote to say?
- Use real examples, metaphors, and/or personal connections to explain your science
- Short answers, also known as sound bites, are key. Practice your sound bites out loud, using metaphors, anecdotes and key points. Are most of your answers longer than 30 seconds to one minute? Shorten them and try again.
- Begin with and focus on what you know, not what you don't know
- Avoid jargon
- Keep your tone conversational, confident, and honest
- Be ready for off-topic questions and practice redirecting the conversation to your primary message using verbal bridges such as "The important thing to remember is..."
- Follow up after the interview with background information such as graphics, statistics, papers, and other visuals
- Treat everything as if it is on the record, even if you are told it isn't!

In-Person Interviews

If your interview is filmed or recorded, there is a little more preparation required.

- Try not to wear distracting clothing, such as patterns, and stick to warm colors
- Make eye contact and speak in complete, declarative sentences
- Don't repeat negative or false statements
- Unless instructed otherwise, ignore the camera and speak directly to the reporter
- Embrace the awkward pause: there's no need to "fill in" silence, and often it's better to let the reporter make the next move
- It is ok if you don't know the answer to a question; if you can, say you will get back to them. Then bridge to one of your key messages.
- If it's recorded, you can always ask to stop and try again

How do I connect with journalists?

- Talk with members of the communications team at the College of the Environment and/or your UW News & Information contact
- Keep a list of journalists that you like based on their coverage of research. Send an occasional note appreciating their work.
- Join Twitter and follow science writers and other scientists. Retweet reporter stories, but don't pitch them on Twitter.
- Participate in communication workshops
- Maintain relationships with journalists you have worked with
- Be your own science journalist through a personal blog, webpage or op-eds

The Marketing and Communications team at the College Environment is here to help you. We can provide more information, opportunities for training and practice, customized feedback, and more.

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