

Getting the Most From the Media

GREGOR HODGSON

Coastal Systems Research GPO Box 3534 Hong Kong

Abstract. The news media are potent tools that few scientists know how to use safely and effectively. Coral reefs are a naturally attractive subject for the press. Presenting scientific information through the media can educate the public about the value of coral reefs and increase taxpayer support for coral reef research and conservation. Researchers need to learn when, where and how to attract the attention of busy editors in radio, television and print media through the use of personal contacts and press releases. By following a few simple rules, scientists can assure that their views are presented accurately. Interacting with the media is free, fun and a powerful method of gaining political backing for science.

Introduction

This paper attempts to answer the question: "Why should a scientist interact with the media?" It then provides information on when, where and how to get the most from contacts with news organizations.

Why deal with the media?

Scientists, particularly in academia, still place significant pressure on each other not to deal with the news media. An unwritten rule, presumably left over from Victorian times, is: "Thou shall not self-promote." A proper scientist is supposed to quietly slave away in the field or laboratory, publish results in peer-reviewed journals, and modestly eschew the public eye. By this standard, only when an earth-shaking discovery is acknowledged by a Noble Prize is it acceptable for scientists to humbly acknowledge their contribution.

Although modesty is a worthy trait in any individual, it is no longer appropriate for scientists

to fail to publicize their work. The reasons for this (Table 1) can be categorized as either "sticks" or "carrots." In the "stick" category, society is experiencing unprecedented demands for public accountability and the vast majority of scientific funding comes from public coffers. Taxpayers have a right to know how and why their money is being spent, and scientists receiving public funding have an obligation to explain their work to the general public. In the US, inadequately publicized science which appears esoteric to the public has become the target of congressional inquiries, time-consuming lawsuits and, sometimes, funding cuts. In the future, scientists failing to explain their work to those paying for it will suffer the consequences.

The public's opinion of science and scientists is at an all-time low. Revelations of scientific fraud have increased the public's distrust of scientists. Part of the cause for this poor impression is a lack of understanding of what science is and what scientists do. As new discoveries in physics and molecular biology become increasingly difficult to explain to a general audience, scientists are devoting less time to doing just that. It is in the interest of all scientists to take the time to educate the public about the nature of science and the value of specific projects.

In the "carrot" category, if a scientist invests time in science education through the media, the effort will increase the chances of obtaining greater funding for science and the projects that are publicized. We would all like to see a greater increase in public support for coral reef conservation. In the business world, every large corporation spends millions on advertising and public relations to try to promote its corporate image and to sell products. In an ideal world, a wise public would realize the true value of science and coral reefs and there would not be a need for explanations; but in the real world, science needs PR just as much as do corporations.

Table 1. Why deal with the media?

- **Obligation** to public to explain how tax money was spent
- **Help** avoid investigations, funding cuts, lawsuits
- **Increase** public understanding of science
- **Help** gain support for science funding
- **Community** participation
- **Fun**, can earn pocket money

An additional incentive to scientists to deal with the media is that it is one method of fulfilling the "community participation" requirements faced by most non-tenured faculty. Finally, promoting science through the media is fun and can boost the ego; for skillful communicators, it can provide a little pocket money.

When, where and how to contact the media

If you discover how to make diamonds from sea urchins, there is little doubt that members of the press will quickly beat their way to your door. For most of us, however, knowing when, where and how to contact the media, is our responsibility.

Before contacting the media, we need to decide what pearls of our work might be of interest, and what type of media to approach. Bear in mind that every day, editors are constantly bombarded with hundreds of press releases, phone calls and other forms of solicitation for their attention. How do you catch an editor's ear? Luckily, coral reef scientists have a comparatively easy task compared with our peers in other disciplines in gaining media attention. Most editors would consider a piece on tropical coral reefs to be good value, particularly during the winter in temperate regions. Of obvious interest are stories with news value that fall within the "Eureka!" or "Disaster strikes!" genres. Surprisingly, given an appropriate angle, editors can be lured to do feature stories on anything from a research program to experimental results. The key is to present your story as something new and to clearly relate how the subject of your story will affect readers or viewers.

For research with an applied angle, such as environmental work, the human connection is immediately apparent. Environmental news has arrived on the front page, and many editors are aware that coral reefs are a valuable resource that is threatened by development. For those scientists working exclusively in basic research, some connection will have to be developed between their work and human values. With a little thought this is quite simple, e.g. basic research on photosynthetic pigments of phytoplankton could be explained as work on

the foundation of the human food chain. Framing your work in the context of its value to humanity will make it more attractive to editors of the popular media.

Once the subject and slant of your story has been chosen, a press release should be written. The primary purpose of a press release is to capture the attention of an editor so that your story will be covered. The first few sentences should convey the excitement of the story and why it is significant. A secondary purpose is to summarize in writing what has occurred or is planned. There will be less chance for errors to creep into the story if technical details are summarized in simple language. The press release can be a useful aid to science editors unfamiliar with your field, and who will not have time to dig out the important numbers from your scientific papers.

For major news events, such as the signing of a contract to build a new research center, a press release can also serve as an invitation to the press to attend a press conference where they may receive more printed material and photographs, and will have the opportunity to meet and ask questions of the individuals involved. Writing an effective press release is an art. Try to obtain some press releases to see how it is done and ask your friends to critique your press release. Does it capture their attention?

There are two ways to contact the media. The first is to personally contact journalists or editors and supply information directly to them. The advantage of this method is that you know that the facts of your story were presented correctly, and you have a chance to develop a personal relationship with individual journalists. A personal relationship can be useful when you are anxious to seek publicity some time in the future. The disadvantage is that it can be time consuming and frustrating to get the attention of a busy editor.

A less time-consuming method is to relay information to the press through your own organization's media- or public-relations office. Most universities and large research organizations have in-house PR sections. Their job usually includes publishing a newsletter and sending out press releases to news organizations; they are constantly looking for good stories. The advantage of approaching the press through an in-house PR officer is that you will be providing information to someone who is being paid to present you and your organization in the best possible light. They should know which newspaper, magazine or TV editors will be interested in the type of stories that can be based on your work. Since the PR office will normally be located close by, it can save you time to contact the media

through them. The disadvantage is that by going through a secondary channel, if you do not take precautions (see next section), your story may not be presented to the press as you would like. Depending on how busy staffers are, a PR office may send out 200 copies of your press release all over the country. They all could end up in editor's trash bins because the PR office did not have time to follow them up. In any case, a PR office will serve as a valuable source of guidance on what aspects of your work will be of interest to the media.

If you decide to make contacts on your own, where do you find the media? The possibilities include local, regional, national and international newspapers, magazines, radio and television (Appendix A). Certain types of stories will only be of interest to the local media (Table 2); examples are announcements of funding for a program or the appointment of a new professor. Ask yourself the question, "Would I be interested to hear about this if it had occurred in another town, region, or country?" to determine an appropriate venue. After choosing the target publication or broadcasting station, the next step is to find out whom to contact.

Most news organizations divide up their work and assign different editors to different tasks. If you are dealing with a fast-breaking story, e.g. an oil spill threatening a coral reef, then you want the news editor. Otherwise, the appropriate editor to contact is the one responsible for science. A special editor may cover science in large organizations such as CNN or Time magazine, but in many big-city newspapers, science is included in the health or environment editor's beat. The masthead of almost every publication includes a list of editors, reporters and their contact numbers; radio and television stations are listed in the telephone directory.

If this is your first attempt at contacting the media, it would be wise to make a trial run with your local or campus newspaper, TV station or magazine. Simply call up and find out who is responsible for covering science and ask if they would be interested in an interview. Have your press release prepared so that you can send it in advance or hand it over at the interview. Local media tend to em-

phasize the people angle of a story. But even in the worst case, e.g. "Green U. Professor Survives Crocodile Attack While Monitoring Coral Spawning", it is usually not too difficult to place a significant chunk of information about your work in the story, and the experience will help you prepare for dealing with more widely seen media. Remember, after your story is published locally, you can still have it published for a wider audience later.

Dealing with the media

Before being interviewed by a reporter, it is helpful to review the goals of the exercise from your perspective and from the perspective of the media. The goal of the reporter is to create an exciting story using simple language for a broad audience. The reporter will be looking for ways to dramatize the events you describe and to emphasize the significance and finality of the conclusions. In contrast, you would simply like to talk about your work without much embellishment and emphasize the tentative nature of your conclusions. Clearly, your goals and those of the reporter are not perfectly matched.

There are several ground rules that can be agreed upon prior to the interview that can help prevent serious problems from developing (Table 3). The balance of the ground rules will shift depending on how badly the reporter wants your story. For example, a reporter may be persuaded to allow you to check a draft of the story before it is published or aired. This gives you the opportunity to correct factual errors, clarify quotes and to delete material that you don't want included. It doesn't give you the right to try and rewrite the story. Scientific jargon is out of place in a popular story. Do not insist on using such terms as "nematocyst," when "stinging cell," although technically inaccurate, gives a much better picture of the structure.

Other interview techniques are to tape record the interview and to give material "off the record." If you tape the interview, later you can check the accuracy of the quotes. You also can provide information that is "off the record." This may be

Table 2. Appropriate stories for various media

Story type	Local	Regional	National	International
Disaster strikes	X	X	X	X
Big discovery	X	X	X	X
New local program	X	X		
New staff	X	X		
Program update	X	X		

Table 3

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Table 3. Ground rules for successful interview

Before the interview

- Mentally review your goals and reporter's goals
- Prepare a Press Release and "art" (visuals)
- Go over ground rules with reporter/editor
- Try to obtain agreement to review draft to fact-check *only*, prior to publication/airing
- Inform reporter/editor that you will tape record the interview if you plan to do so
- Establish knowledge level of reporter

During the interview

- Present Press Release if not already sent out
- Present demonstration of work
- Avoid "Cold Fusion Syndrome"—do not present unpublished scientific conclusions
- Clearly separate personal opinion from scientific results
- Avoid self-promotion, sweeping generalizations
- Provide useful printed background material
- Mention that you are available for follow-up questions
- Try to avoid "off record" comments
- Thank the reporter for covering the story

After the interview

- Be available to answer follow-up questions
- Remind reporter/editor of agreement to fact-check draft
- When fact-checking, only correct errors, do not edit style

background material that will help explain your story, but that you do not want to see publicized. It may be the name of a company or person that you do not want to identify. Bear in mind that if the reporter does not honor the agreement, the only penalty is to exclude that newspaper or station from future contact.

Before the interview begins, it saves time to try to establish the knowledge level of the reporter. A reporter from the magazine *Biotechnology* will feel at home discussing electrophoresis, while someone from a local newspaper will require an explanation. A good technique for increasing the interest level of a reporter is to invite them to see a demonstration of your work in the field or in the lab. This will inevitably result in a better story.

During the interview, there are several situations that you should avoid. Most importantly, to protect your scientific standing, you do not want to be caught in the "Cold Fusion Syndrome," that is, publishing important results in the newspaper before they have passed peer review in a scientific journal. Also, you should be extremely careful to separate your scientific results from your personal opinion. For example, your results may show that hot water kills corals, and it may be your opinion that Global Warming will wipe out all coral reefs within 10 years. A reporter is looking for exactly that type of nonscientific sweeping statement to use as a headline. You should be careful to insist on

limiting your statement to something like, "In my opinion, coral reefs may be damaged if Global Warming heats the sea by X degrees." Every time a scientist makes an unsubstantiated claim it devalues science, especially if the claim later proves to be untrue. Some coral reef biologists involved in the early horror stories about *Acanthaster* invasions lost credibility.

Other areas to avoid are self-promotion and sweeping generalizations. Stating that your lab is the best in the world is not going to win friends. If you are not sure, never claim that you are the only one who has done something, or sure enough, you will hear from someone else who has done the same thing.

After the interview, it is helpful to provide the reporter with a selected sample of printed background information such as related papers and duplicates of pertinent photos, and to mention that you are available for follow-up questions.

After publication or airing of your story, despite your best efforts to carefully review the reporter's work, some errors still may have crept in. If the errors are serious, call the reporter immediately and calmly point them out. In the print media, you can request that a written correction be published, however, this should only be done if an error is made which, for example, suggests that you believe something which you do not. It will not affect the goal of publishing your story if *Stylocoeniella* is spelled incorrectly or if the experimental temperature was 2° C warmer than reported. If the story came out well, call or send a note to let those responsible know that you appreciate their efforts and would like to work with them in the future.

A final alternative method of dealing with the media is to write your own story. The advantage of writing is that you can present what you want and get paid for your effort. Although writing for *New Scientist* or *Natural History* comes naturally for most of us, it would be nice to see more stories on coral reefs being published in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. It is fun to see your own by-line in well-known publications and the payments, which range from US\$0.25 to \$2.00 per word, are an added incentive. Books such as the *Writer's Market* (Kissling, 1992) provide lists of the hundreds of publications which accept free-lance material.

In conclusion, interacting with the media is one way that scientists can publicly account for their expenditure of taxpayer's money. There is a wide diversity of newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations at the local, regional, national and international levels which would be appropriate venues for stories about coral reef science. By fol-

lowing a few simple guidelines, dealing with the press can be a rewarding experience. Focusing more attention on coral reefs will help generate public and political support for greater funding for coral reef science and conservation.

References

Kissling M (1991) 1992 Writer's Market, Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, Ohio, p 998

Appendix A.

Contact information for news media

Newspapers

Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611 USA Tel: (312)222-3232
 The Christian Science Monitor, One Norway Street, Boston, MA 02115 USA. Tel: (617)450-2303
 International Herald Tribune, 181 Avenue Charles de Gaulle, 92521, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France. Tel: (146)-37-9300
 Los Angeles Times, Times Mirror Square, Los Angeles, CA 90053 USA. Tel: (213)237-3000 Fax: (213)237-4712
 New York Times, 229 W. 43 Street, New York, NY 10036 USA. Tel: (212)556-1234
 San Francisco Chronicle, 901 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 USA. Tel: (415)777-1111

The Times (of London), Times Newspapers, 1 Virginia Street, London E1 9XN, England. Tel: 71-782-5000
 Wall Street Journal, Dow Jones & Co., Inc., 200 Liberty Street, New York, NY 10281 USA. Tel: (212)416-2000
 The Washington Post, 1150 15th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20071 USA. Tel: (202)334-6000

Magazines

Time, Time & Life Building, Rockefeller Center, New York, NY 10030 USA. Tel: (212)522-1212
 Newsweek, 444 Madison Avenue, New York NY 10022 USA. Tel: (212)350-4796 Fax: (212)350-4993
 Science News, National Science Teachers Assoc., 1742 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20009 USA. Tel: (202)328-5800
 Wilderness, The Wilderness Society, 900 17th Street NW, Washington, D.C. Tel: (202)833-2300 Fax: (202)429-3958
 World Watch, World Watch Institute, 1776 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 USA. Tel: (202)452-1999 Fax: (202)296-7365

Television

ABC, 7 Lincoln Square, New York NY 10023 USA. Tel: (212)456-7777 Fax: (212)887-3222
 CBS, 524 W. 57th St. New York NY 10019 USA. Tel: (212)975-4321 Fax: (212)975-8714
 NBC, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020 USA. Tel: (212)664-4444 Fax: (212)765-1478
 PBS (WNET-NY), 356 W. 58th St., New York, NY 10019 Tel: (212)560-2000 Fax: (212)560-3297