

» Working with Mainstream Media

“THE ‘GOLD STANDARD’ FOR ACADEMICS IS GETTING THEIR WORK IN A PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATION, AND THAT IS ABSOLUTELY AS IT SHOULD BE. BUT IF YOUR RESEARCH IS HIGH ENOUGH QUALITY FOR A PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATION, I CAN’T BELIEVE THAT IT CANNOT BE PRESENTED TO A WIDER AUDIENCE AS WELL.”

(ZARNECKI, 2007).



WHY?

The notion of a gap between research and practice is well established, and the mainstream media can be a tool for researchers and academics to bridge this. Publicity through mainstream outlets such as television, radio and newspapers can obviously raise the profile of research in the eyes of the general public, but it can also play a substantive role in influencing the professional and governmental spheres (NERC, 2009).

The media can be seen as a key part of the “connecting web” that links researchers to policy makers and practitioners (Rickinson, 2005). Therefore, researchers need not see media exposure as an ends to itself, but as means to reaching those in a position to put research into practice. Indeed it has been suggested that academics should see the mass media as “gate-keepers for the passage of their work into the public domain” (Rhind, 2003). In addition, research has shown an association between coverage of academic articles in newspapers and increased citations (Kiernan, 2003).

HOW?

Publicising research through the mass media can be a fraught business. Academic outputs will inevitably undergo an element of translation before they can be presented to the lay-person, and this can lead to inaccurate reporting of findings. There is a danger of over-simplification that is particularly acute when research conclusions are conditional or nuanced. In addition, researchers also need to bear in mind that news organisations will likely have an agenda of some description, be that selling copies or something more ideological; research can be wilfully as well as unintentionally misinterpreted. For these reasons, it is important to seek assistance in dealing with the media.

For many, the primary source of assistance will be a university press office or communications department. These are likely to be able to help academics prepare for interviews, time stories so that they match the news agenda and suggest suitable publications to direct research towards. They are also likely to be able to help publicise findings through internal publications and websites. Many universities will insist that you consult with them before engaging with the media on any issues that might impact upon the university’s reputation. Along similar lines, media training courses and grants are offered by many research councils (ESRC, EPSRC, NERC etc.). These may be available free of charge to researchers or academics whose work is research council funded. ▶



► For academics wishing to take a proactive approach, one of the first steps will be to develop an understanding of the landscape, in terms of what media vehicles have an overlap in subject area with their own work, and who their audience is likely to be. Research that is more immediately relevant to their audience's lives will be more likely to be picked by media outlets, so academics should consider what aspects of their findings will be most attractive and to whom. It is worth taking into account the potential audience's level of knowledge, geographic location and likely interests, as well as its size and diversity. Once the medium and audience have been identified, work can begin on adjusting the tone of any communications to match its intended context.

Finally, researchers need to be aware that journalists for television, radio and print media work on a radically different timescale to academics. The nature of journalists' deadlines can mean that academics have to walk a tightrope - they need to respond quickly to journalists' requests but also ensure that the university press office is consulted or fact-checking is undertaken where appropriate. Academics should be accurate and realistic when giving timescales to journalists and be punctual when returning phone calls and such like. Ultimately, academics need to be as prompt as possible without allowing themselves to be pressured into making rash statements or failing to properly consult their press office.

REFERENCES

- KIERNAN, V. (2003). Diffusion of News about Research. *Science Communication*, 25(1)
- RHIND, D. (2003). Great Expectations: The Social Sciences in Britain. *Commission on Social Sciences*.
- RICKINSON, M. (2005). Practitioners' Use of Research. *NERF Working Paper 7.5*, London: National Education Research Forum NERF.
- ZARNECKI, J. (2007). Quoted from Cook, Y. (2007). "Academics are finding entertaining ways of publicising their research." *The Independent*. 3rd July, 2007.

RESOURCES

- Media training through UK research councils:
- ESRC: tinyurl.com/5tga6b3
- EPSRC: tinyurl.com/6leyftq
- NERC:
- www.nerc.ac.uk/press/mediatraining.asp
- Cityform research group:
- www.city-form.org/uk
- Media links to Cityform's research:
- New Scientist: tinyurl.com/6kf3dsr
- The Guardian: tinyurl.com/5rd7lbs
- The Daily Mail: tinyurl.com/5uzxecy
- BBC Online: tinyurl.com/3xg45y

» Stories from SUE

Media interest in academic findings can be unexpected and sudden; the *Cityform* consortium demonstrated how reacting positively to media interest can lead to increased exposure. One of many findings from their extensive research was an observation that there was an increased tendency for robins to sing during the night in urban areas that are particularly noisy. From this, they surmised that robins have adapted to urban settings by singing at times when the birdsong does not have to compete with city noise pollution.

This finding was picked up by the *New Scientist* magazine, a publication with a readership beyond science professionals. From there, the story spread to other media outlets. Interviews were done with a number of journalists, and the findings were subsequently publicised in *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, the BBC's flagship *Today* programme and BBC Online amongst others.

This publicity did not originate from a pre-planned strategy; the consortium's activities were a reaction to the initial interest which was kindled by researchers making themselves available for interview. Following the initial exposure *Cityform* highlighted the story it by putting it on the front page of their website. This achieved two things – it made an attractive story increasingly visible and thus maximised media interest, and it provided a facility to direct those who were interested in the robins story to other research undertaken as part of the *Cityform* project.