

Talking to the media:

12 tips for dealing with the public media

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(roughly translated by Moritz Daum)

The phone rings, a journalist asks for a statement on the question why career choices are gender-specific. Or: you receive an e-mail asking to provide background information on a research about “learning from mistakes”. Or: You receive a request from a radio station for a three-minute interview on xenophobia in Germany. Many other examples are conceivable. It is possible that the topic in question falls within the area of expertise of your own research. Or perhaps the subject of the inquiry is a little further away from your area of expertise, or it is not related to your expertise at all.

What should you do in each case? How can one prepare well for a conversation with media representatives? What should be considered during the interview? In the following we would like to give some tips that can be helpful when dealing with the media. They are based on our own experience with media inquiries and are intended to help media novices to deal with media inquiries in a professional and productive way.

Tips 1 to 4 refer to the decision whether one can/should answer a media inquiry, tips 5 to 10 to the answer of the media inquiry itself, and tips 11 and 12 finally to the protection of your media statements.

Tips 1 to 4: How should I decide?

Tip 1: “Give science away”. It's easy to reject a request on the grounds that it doesn't fall within your area of expertise. However, you should always consider carefully whether you have something to contribute to the topic after all. As a scientist, we have a certain obligation to communicate findings through the media, because we are paid by the public. Basically, when answering media enquiries, it is a matter of bringing scientific findings to the public. When participating in public discourse, professional political considerations should play an important role (in the sense of “Psychology is an important subject”; “Psychology has answers to social questions”; “Psychology is empirical research” etc.).

Tip 2: “Service”. Serious enquiries, which cannot be answered much as one should have liked to, should not be turned away, but should be referred to the media relations office of the DGPs (<http://www.dgps.de/index.php?id=46&L=0>), to the expert database on the homepage of the DGPs (see <mailto:klostermann@dgps.de>) or directly to another expert that you know.

Tip 3: “Pilate”. There are two options for enquiries for which there is almost certainly no relevant expert or reliable textbook knowledge in psychology.

The first option is to make this clear and to reformulate the question in such a way that it can be answered with existing empirical evidence. An example: Even if there is no research on the

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tidying up behaviour in common tea kitchens, the question “Why does nobody tidy up the common tea kitchen?” can be reformulated into a question of diffusion of responsibility in groups, on which psychology has a lot to say.

The second option is to make it clear that the question does not fall within the subject area of scientific psychology and that there are no reliable findings in this regard. There are questions that are too far from scientific questions (e.g. “Why are men less adept at gift-wrapping than women?”) that one can or even should confidently refuse to answer them in order not to jeopardize the image of scientific psychology.

Tip 4: “Self-protection”. In general, government agencies are obliged to provide information to the media. Nevertheless, one should always check whether the medium making the request is reputable. In individual cases it is often difficult to assess the seriousness of a medium. However, experience is gained over time and, in case of doubt, colleagues (or the DGPs media office) can be asked about their experience with a particular medium. If a medium is considered as not serious, a request should be rejected.

Tips 5 to 10: What exactly should I do at the interview?

If you have decided to answer a median question, the following tips may be helpful:

Tip 5: “The message”. Answering media enquiries should serve to convey scientific information. In order to have this information ready in the interview, it is advisable to have a preliminary talk or to ask concrete questions in advance. You can then prepare yourself better and also develop a clear line of argumentation. The “message” is important here: what is it that I want the audience of the interview to know and to remember? If there is enough time, you can send the journalist the formulated answers before the interview, so that you can better adjust to the interview situation. The preparation of the answers is particularly important for live or original sound interviews, where you usually have no more than three minutes to answer all questions.

It is often the case that editors would like to conduct a background or information discussion before the actual interview. If you have such an inquiry for this, you should definitely allow time for it.

Tip 6: “Professionalism”. All questions asked should be answered professionally, that is, on the basis of the current state of research. A clear distinction should be made here between what is one's own research on the topic in question and what belongs to the state of general scientific discourse. It can happen that in the course of the interview a question is asked that you cannot answer yourself. There is no shame in admitting that one has no expertise in this area.

Tip 7: “Understandable terms and short sentences”. A psychological lay person is neither familiar with our theories nor with our technical terms. You should therefore always try to express yourself in understandable language and with short sentences. Foreign words, jargon, or technical terms should not be used or, if unavoidable, explained briefly and concisely. Answers should be short and concise, especially in radio and television interviews. Examples for clarification are helpful. It can also do no harm to pronounce the most important message twice in changed terminology. Also, if you know the target group of the respective contribution, it is easier to prepare your “linguistic style”.

Tip 8: “Kantian imperative”. Information transfer and professionalism also imply that one does not take a one-sided scientific standpoint (e.g. “the effect of violent computer games on aggressive behaviour has not yet been unequivocally proven” or: “it has been unequivocally

proven that violent computer games are the most important risk factor for violence in children and adolescents”). In contrast, and above all, it should be conveyed what can be regarded as sufficiently scientifically substantiated. Criticism of certain positions or findings must be clearly recognisable as such. The recommendation is therefore: “Always answer in such a way that the maxim of your answer can be the basis of a general position”. Therefore, we call this tip “Kantian imperative”.

Tip 9: “Neutrality”. If we are asked as scientists, we are not legitimized to include personal, moral, or political evaluations in this statement or even to use our expert status for political agitation. Our moral position does not receive any additional importance through our professional expertise. However, we can certainly make a scientific assessment of (e.g. political) decisions if this is covered by scientific findings.

Tip 10: “Abstinence”. Always be cautious when dealing with current events in which specific persons are involved and whose course could be immediately influenced by expert statements (e.g. ongoing legal proceedings). In general, inquiries about specific persons should be treated with great caution (e.g. "Why did Uli Hoeneß gamble?"), because we as scientists cannot and should not make statements about individual cases.

Tips 11 and 12: How do I protect my statements?

Tip 11: “Lenin's rule”. “Trust is good, control is better”. Whenever possible, ask for permission to check the result in advance (e.g. an e-mail with the text in which you are quoted). Even if this is not always possible (e.g. for live broadcasts): the response to the request is a good estimate of the seriousness of the request. If it is a newspaper/magazine, you should point out to the interviewer at the very beginning of the interview that quotes must be proofread and approved before they are published. If the authorisation of an interview is given under this reservation, the journalist must comply with it. It is therefore important to make this agreement before the beginning of an interview. It will often also be possible to agree that you will not only be able to read your own literal quotations, but the entire text of the article. This helps to avoid misunderstandings - which is also in the interest of the journalist. However, because journalists are usually under great time pressure, proofreading should be done quickly and should not take longer than one day.

Sometimes it happens that journalists conduct background discussions with many different experts in the course of their research. In this case, one cannot be sure to be cited. It can also happen that the journalist uses the information you have provided, but only a part of the respondents is directly cited. Here too, it is advisable to clarify in advance that you want to be cited and that you want to check the literal quotations in advance for approval.

Tip 12: “Recycling”. Media reports are subject to copyright. The rights to a newspaper or magazine article are held by the respective institution, even if it reports on original content or results of its own work. For example, the articles may not be made available online (e.g., on the interviewee’s personal website) without prior permission from the rights holder. This also applies to literal quotations. If these rules are violated, publishers may well charge lavish licence fees. Some publishers are very active in this area. If one wants to make media reports based on interviews with one’s own person, for example, on one’s own website, available for download to an interested public, written permission must be obtained from the publisher (not the editorial office) in each individual case.

Literature:

Greve, W., Dietrich, J., Elsner, B., Freund, A.M., Hartmann, P., Lang, F. & Tesch-Römer, C. (2011). *Mit den Medien reden. Eine kleine Handreichung für den Umgang mit medialer Öffentlichkeit*. Manuskript der Fachgruppe Entwicklungspsychologie der DGPs.