

# When you're the news:

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## Media interview tips and tricks



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for UNSW academics  
to inform debate and  
influence policy makers.

## 01 THE CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

There has never been a better time to get your research into the media and out into the world at large.

While there have been substantial cutbacks to newspapers and magazines, online outlets and social media are proliferating, and broadcast news and current affairs are becoming more important.

There is a range of radio and television options – commercial, public and community – and these cater to different audiences.

Journalists are looking to talk to people who are interesting, engaging and passionate.

The ABC is perhaps the most interested in covering university research and events. It also shares its news gathering services and content between its radio, television and digital platforms. An ABC reporter sent to interview you for a brief TV news story, for example, may also run the quotes as a radio news story and then use the interview in its entirety as a full-length radio interview. The transcript of the interview could then appear online.

Each format requires different things from you – “the talent” – and you will need to adapt your approach accordingly. Radio programs such as *702 ABC Sydney Breakfast* typically want a more in-depth interview and a conversational tone. Radio news wants the shortest, most powerful “grabs” possible.

There is also significant demand for good opinion writing from credible sources. Traditional print media outlets such as *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian* typically publish three or four opinion pieces every day. Online media such as *The Drum* and *The Conversation* specialise in opinion, and can publish a dozen or more pieces daily.

This is a real opportunity for UNSW academics to inform debate and influence policy makers. Best of all, you are the one doing the writing so you can't be quoted out of context. Depending on the outlet, however, the opinion editor may still want to work with you to edit your piece.

## 02 PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

Preparation is everything. Think about what the journalist is looking for and what you want to get across. Jot down the three or four key points/messages you want to make and have your facts and examples to hand.

Understand the needs of different media outlets and platforms. For a newspaper interview, you can afford to be more expansive than in a radio or TV interview.

Consider catchy sentences you could use to summarise your key points. What is the one quote you'd like the story to include? This is your key message, your "quotable quote".

Rehearse out loud. This may involve practising with someone from the External Communications team, a friend, a colleague or in front of a mirror.

Anticipate tough questions and have answers ready. Do not be defensive or dishonest. If your research has been criticised, then chances are it will be put to you during the interview.

## 03 GENERAL TIPS

Journalists generally interview academics for their expert opinions on topical issues or to follow up on new research/projects/speeches. These interviews are information seeking: What, When, Where, How and Why?

Before you agree to an interview, make sure you know the basics.

- Where is the journalist from? TV or radio?
- What exactly do they want to talk about?
- Will it be a live interview or pre-recorded?
- Who else has been interviewed?
- What "angle" (perspective) are they taking?
- What's their deadline?

What can you offer that is relevant? If you don't think you're the right person, suggest someone else from UNSW (or elsewhere). Even if the reporter's questions are not in your area of expertise, however, you may still be able to contribute.

## 04 ONCE THE INTERVIEW BEGINS

- Assume you are "on-the-record" at all times. This means anything you say (or do) may be used in the story.
- Be open, honest and passionate about your work and opinion. These qualities are attractive.
- Respond to the interviewer but don't let them take total control. You want to get your key points across. Don't allow journalists to push you into saying something you don't believe.
- Don't wait for an interviewer to ask you the "right" question. Work what you want to say into the interview. You might only get a few questions, so get to the point quickly.
- If you're asking a negative question, use "bridging techniques" to transition to a positive response. For example, "The important thing to remember is...", "That's a good question but the real issue is...", "However", "What parents really need to remember is..."
- Be concise. TV and radio news interviews are heavily edited, particularly when interviewees waffle.
- Instead of saying "we", "my" or "our", say UNSW Sydney at least once
- Keep it simple. Don't assume the audience knows as much about the topic as you do. Use accessible everyday language.
- Avoid jargon, acronyms and complex language. Keep it simple.
- Make what you have to say interesting and relevant.
- If you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to say so.
- Don't say "no comment".

## 05 TIPS FOR TELEVISION

TV news and current affairs segments are usually short, succinct and use pictures to help tell their story. Being invited to talk about your work or to add to a current debate on national television is a good opportunity. Here are some tips to help you make the most of your time on camera.

### Clothes

Ensure that your outfit doesn't distract from your message. Avoid wearing: all black, all white, thin stripes, complex patterns or anything that might distract the viewer (including dangly earrings or loud scarfs). Consider keeping a jacket and shirt at work that you know look good on camera.

### Make-up

Cameras and lights leach colour from people's faces and add shine, especially in the studio. Women should wear foundation or matte powder and refresh their make-up. Make sure you have brushed your hair.

### Set-up

TV requires quite a bit of setting up. The "soundie" may put a microphone onto your lapel while the cameraman checks the lighting. Use this time to chat to the journalist and find out more about what's ahead. It's the journalist's job to help you perform well, so let them. But always remember: you are on the record.

Once you're in position, make sure you're comfortable. If you need a glass of water or a minute to compose yourself, say so. Don't be shy.

### Before you start

- Plant your feet into the earth, hip-width apart. This will anchor and calm you. Most people feel more comfortable with one foot placed in front of the other, placing slightly more weight on the front foot.
- Breathe. Take a few slow, calming breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Smile. This will lift your energy.

### When the camera is rolling

Look at the person interviewing you. Do not look into the camera. Hold your gaze and your head steady

while you talk. If you tend to move your eyes when you think, wait before speaking.

When you're ready, look at the interviewer and answer. If you find it too confronting to look into the interviewer's eyes, look at his or her forehead, but keep your eyes steady.

On rare occasions, interviews are conducted via satellite link. In this case, you will be wearing an ear piece and you will be asked to look down the barrel of the camera. Sometimes, the questions will be fed to you via a mobile phone set to speaker.

Even though you are actually staring into the lens of a camera, it's important to imagine you are talking to a real person. If it helps, ask someone to stand close beside the camera and address your comments to them. If no-one is available, look at the camera operator. Don't shout your answers at the journalist just because you aren't in the same room; speak naturally.

Don't be afraid to use your face and hands to express yourself, but try to keep your legs still and grounded. Smiling when you are listening to a question can make you appear more engaged. Make sure, however, that smiling is appropriate to the context.

Project an aura of being relaxed and focused. Enjoy the opportunity to share your expertise.

Energy is important. A lot of people withdraw. You may need to amp it up a bit. Practice and asking for feedback will help.

TV wants your expert opinion delivered confidently, but without jargon. It wants colourful, lively phrases.

Phrase your answers in complete, self-contained sentences so they would make sense if played back without the context of the question.

For example:

**Journalist:** "Were you surprised to find that ...?"

**You:** "I was surprised that my research showed ..."

**Journalist:** "How many flood bottlenecks are there in rural NSW?"

**You:** "We estimate there are five key areas affected by flood bottlenecks in NSW."

Put any statistics you use into context. For example: “You are 100 times more likely to drown at a beach than to be eaten by a shark.”

If the interview gets adversarial, don’t take the bait. Stay calm and considered. Don’t get defensive. Just smile and say what you believe.

Be aware that an interviewer may ask you the same thing in different ways. Sometimes, this is a sneaky way to get the answer they want. Sometimes, however, they are simply trying to elicit an answer that fits better with the story or a more concise response.

### What is overlay?

Journalists sometimes want footage to “lay over” for their script. They may ask you to walk across a quadrangle, take a call at your desk, read through a report or look down a microscope. These actions can look extremely awkward if you are not relaxed.

Rather than walk toward the camera, try to do something you would ordinarily do at work. Consider grabbing a colleague and pretending to talk to them about the project while the camera rolls.

If you have good pictures or graphs (still or moving) associated with your work, these can also be used as overlay. They also help to “sell” the story in the first place. Make sure you have high-resolution copies handy.

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## 06 TV CURRENT AFFAIRS

These programs include *7.30*, *Lateline* and *A Current Affair*, and usually require a 10- to 15-minute pre-recorded interview that will be edited into “grabs” to form a “package” (ie. a news story). You may be asked to come into the studio or to do an interview live-to-air.

### Preparation

This is the same as for all TV interviews, however studio lights are particularly bright, so make-up is even more important. If you are going into a studio, ask if they will do your make-up for you.

TV current affairs interviews are most likely to be done while you are seated. If that’s the case:

- Sit up straight. Don’t swing in your chair.
- If you are on a panel show, you can place your hands on the desk or use them to emphasise your points. Judicious use of hand movements can be very effective in reinforcing your point.
- Look at the interviewer not the camera.
- If you are on a panel show, look at the other panelists while they are speaking and turn to the interviewer when they finish.
- TV news will expect your answers to be longer, but never speak for more than a minute. Keep your eyes on the questioner. Let them lead the interview, but don’t forget to get your key points across.
- If the interview is taking a turn for the worse, don’t be defensive. Smile and make a joke. For example, “Look I appreciate you want me to come out and state that all rubber ducks are yellow, but you need to understand that that’s not always the case.”
- If you don’t know the answer, don’t panic. Just say that’s not really in your area of expertise.
- Resist the urge to correct the interviewer unless it is absolutely necessary. They won’t appreciate it.

## 07 RADIO NEWS

Radio news typically wants a catchy, 15- to 20-second sentence or “grab” pre-recorded by phone.

The same principles apply as for TV news, but you don't need to worry about makeup, clothes or flyaway hair. The journalist will, however, still want powerful, punchy quotes.

- If it's a phone interview, use your office landline rather than a mobile if possible. Skype and Facetime audio also work well.
- Keep the phone a little bit away from your mouth and do not touch or rattle the cord.
- Answer the questions simply, calmly and in everyday language.
- Think of a snappy way to sum up your research or opinion.
- As with TV interviews, try to keep formulate your answers in complete sentences. The journalist's question will not go to air.
- If you make a mistake, ask for the question to be repeated.

The major rule of radio  
is: never be boring.

## 08 RADIO CURRENT AFFAIRS

Current affairs programs such as ABC's 'AM' and 'PM' typically want a three- to five-minute pre-recorded interview. Occasionally, these interviews are done live. The interview may run as a stand-alone or be edited for a package.

Talk shows, such as breakfast and drive programs, are usually live and more chatty and informal than current affairs interviews. Sometimes, if the issue is sufficiently topical, the interview will include talk-back. If you are asked to come in to the studio, you may be part of a panel of guests. Find out who they are ahead of time and what their stance is on the issue so you are ready to respond on air.

### Preparation

#### Phone

Be comfortable at your desk and put a “do not disturb” sign on the door. Keep the phone still. Use a landline. Looking at a picture or a mirror while you talk may help to keep you animated.

#### Studio

If you are in the studio, put a hand-space between you and the microphone, and let it amplify your voice. Look at the interviewer, but don't be distracted if they turn away to read screens or operate the control panel.

Radio is an intimate medium. It should come across as a personal conversation between you and the interviewer.

The major rule of radio is: never be boring.

- Imagine you are talking to one person, not a big audience. This keeps your voice intimate.
- Smile to lift your voice.
- Use everyday language, not jargon. A simple explanation of a difficult concept is gold to the media. Be friendly but authoritative.
- Answer the question, then make the points you want to get across.
- They may also be filming in the studio so be aware of cameras

- Paint a picture. TV uses pictures to tell a story, but radio needs to create an image in the listener's mind. Describe in visual terms.
- Put your research in context by talking about what it means for the listener: their health, their family, their future etc. Think about the human element and the "so what?" question.
- Remember, you are not speaking to your peers. This is a different audience. Yes, you want to retain the integrity of your research, but you don't want to lapse into jargon.
- Have some examples ready. Radio loves a vivid anecdote.
- If the announcer makes a joke – laugh (but don't try to be funnier than they are).
- Remember the name of the presenter and use it.
- If the presenter takes a talkback call, you may be required to comment. Try to respond naturally, even if the point is oppositional. "Well, that's an unusual story and I feel for you Jeff ... but in my research I've never seen that. What usually happens is..." Talk like a human and empathise

## 09 AFTER IT'S ALL OVER

Avoid the natural tendency to cringe and think of all the things you forgot to say.

Instead, remember what went well. Ask for feedback from friends and colleagues and, most importantly, listen or watch the interview yourself. Remember, you will be even better next time.

Follow-up with the journalist ASAP if you promised to provide extra information. Ask when the story will be published. Thank them if they covered the story well.

## 10 IN SUMMARY

### Preparation is vital

- Know who you are talking to and what they need from you.
- Write down three or four points that will be your key message so you can control the interview.

### During the interview

- Smile, take a slow breath and try to relax.
- Use simple, direct language and catchy phrases.
- Be brief, clear, direct, passionate, confident, honest and interesting.
- Enjoy yourself.

## 11 THE FINAL WORD

- Stories may be dropped or journalists just won't be interested in your research no matter how worthy it is. This does not mean you have failed or that your research is not interesting. Sometimes, it's just about the timing of the news cycle.
- Print journalists generally won't send you the copy before publication.
- If you are quoted "out of context" or have an issue with a story that is published or broadcast, you may be able to pursue a retraction or correction. We can help you with this.

### IT IS IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO:

- Be listed on the UNSW database of experts.
- Tell us if you are interested in more formal media and/or presentation training

For any further questions or help, please contact us at [media@unsw.edu.au](mailto:media@unsw.edu.au) or (02) 9385 2864.