

**TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA**

*Public Communication for Early-Career Education Researchers:  
Learning the Ropes*

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*Hi Ron, We got a voicemail from someone writing an article for the George Lucas Educational Foundation magazine. It sounds like they want to talk to us about assessment in simulations. Are there any policies on this? Thanks.*

*A CRESST Researcher*

The above was a recent question from one of our research staff at UCLA. As the communications director for our center, my reply was that our policy is to return reporter phone calls promptly and answer questions to the best of our ability. If the question or questions are beyond your expertise, refer them to other sources, either inside or outside of our center. My concluding suggestion was:

*Talk about your own work and others whose work you know best and like. You will do great!*

I encourage all of our researchers to do interviews with the media and I try to make it a successful experience. Doing so fulfills an important public responsibility, providing accurate information on topics in which our center researchers hold expertise.

Researchers sometimes worry that they will answer a reporter's questions poorly, fear that they will be misquoted, or believe that they should defer to someone with more experience, such as the center director. But the director is not always available nor necessarily the best expert on every topic. I believe too that researchers should know how to communicate well with the media so that as they advance in their career, they will be fluent in all aspects of public communications.

The following are some suggestions for effectively working with the media. These are not rules, but guidelines.

1. Make a reporter's call or email a high priority. A reporter working *on deadline* has a story that must be turned in to the editor by the end of the day. Unless you are running flat out and truly can't handle a 10-15 minute phone call, push other work aside.
2. At the beginning of any interview, ask for a *brief* background about the story. Is the story based on a recently released report or an incident? Who have they talked with so far? Getting background information serves two purposes: 1) provides context to any comment that you might make and 2) gives you a moment to ask yourself: Is this in my field of expertise? Do I know enough to provide useful input? What might I say that would be helpful?
3. Make sure that you fully understand any questions being asked. Don't hesitate to ask for clarification and more background, although avoid becoming the interviewer yourself. If a reporter wants you to comment on

- a report that you haven't read, ask for time to read it. You can find most reports on the Internet.
4. Be brief. As a researcher, you generally ask research questions, design instruments, collect data, analyze data, and draw conclusions from the results. Usually a reporter is interested in the results. Keep your answers simple and to the point.
  5. Respond as the expert you are, but defer to others who are better qualified when you reach into areas beyond your expertise. Realize however, that a reporter working on deadline may be unable to reach a more qualified expert. You may be the most qualified person in their space of time.
  6. Support your responses with completed research studies whenever possible, ideally your own. Provide names of other experts to contact or other studies relevant to the current work.
  7. Offer the reporter fact sheets and other supporting information. Fax or overnight background material. If sending a full report, either flag or highlight the most important pages or paragraphs. Reporters seldom have time to read a full report.
  8. Most educational research does not have a single clear-cut answer. If there are limits to a study, for example, inform the reporter of those limits. Provide balance. Be honest.
  9. Be professional. I suggest that you avoid criticizing other organizations or individuals. It can come back to haunt you or the organization that you represent. Even if we say "my opinion only," our organization's name will be included in our attribution.
  10. Never leave reporters hanging. If you feel uncomfortable talking to the press, fine, but call them back and provide names of others whose opinions and expertise you value. If you don't want to call a reporter back, tell your communications office and ask them to reply for you.
  11. Don't ask to review a reporter's article before it goes to print. They don't have the time and won't do it. But feel free to ask when the article will appear and let your communications office know about it.
  12. If you know you are going to be interviewed, prepare in advance. Write out your answers to questions that you think a reporter might ask you. This helps to organize your thoughts and responses. It also gives you an opportunity to review any facts or figures you may be using. Stay up with news in your field, not just research.
  13. Everything you say is "on the record," and the reporter considers that you are on the record unless you both agree otherwise. There should virtually

never be a situation where you need to speak to a reporter “off the record.”

14. Not every interview with a reporter will result in a quote. Newspapers have tight space requirements and you shouldn't feel slighted when you are not quoted in the story. There will likely be another opportunity. You are building a relationship.
15. What should you do if you are misquoted? That's a difficult question. If your words have been rephrased, but the content is accurate, then I don't advise doing anything. A reporter may actually improve our spoken words. If it is a major misquote, that is, the quote is perhaps the opposite of what you said, then you should feel free to contact the reporter. You might ask for a correction, although corrections are oftentimes lumped together and may not catch many readers attention. If a reporter continually gets information wrong, then a phone call to the editor is an appropriate option.
- 16) Your goal is to build a relationship with reporters. Remember to say thanks and encourage the reporter to call you back on future stories.

### **Getting your message out:**

The following are some suggestions for reaching out to the media to share your own research.

- 1) Build a relationship with your media or communications office right now. Let them know who you are and your areas of expertise. Most universities have media contact lists, so ask to be added to that list.
- 2) If you have a specific research study or report that will be coming out, contact your communications office well ahead of time. Let them know about your findings and the significance that your research will have for the public. The earlier you let your communications office know about a report, say two or three months before its release date, the more likely your message will reach a broad audience.
- 3) Consider many ways to share your research. Certainly a printed news release targeting newspapers across the country should be part of your communications strategy. Also consider outreach via:
  - Radio and television stations,
  - Education magazines (non-journals),
  - Well-known bloggers,
  - A Wikipedia entry if appropriate,
  - Op-eds,

- Writing a blog yourself
  - Hosting or being part of an education seminar or conference
- 4) Suggest a presentation topic to the Education Writer's Association or the Hechinger Institute. For example, in the early fall of each year, EWA begins working on possible topics and speakers for their spring annual meeting. That's a good time to pitch a story to them. They also do regional seminars during the year. Check out what they are doing at [www.ewa.org/](http://www.ewa.org/). The Hechinger Institute web site is at [hechinger.tc.columbia.edu/](http://hechinger.tc.columbia.edu/). Or put together your own local education research seminar for reporters in your state or regional area.
  - 5) Consider smaller, lesser-known media outlets or markets. Sure, you might want to be on Oprah or have a quote in USA Today, but you are competing against more people and usually very well known names. Your chances of publication are higher in a regional or local publication.
  - 6) What do you do if you don't have a communications office, or if they don't have enough staff to help? First, get as much as you can from whoever is available to help. You may only need a media contact list and assistance with writing a standard university news release. Don't be afraid to ask and to push. Second, if that doesn't work, or you truly have no media assistance, the Internet provides you the opportunity to promote your own work at little or no cost. You or an administrative assistant can create your own media contact list by searching the Internet and finding reporters who write about education. Try writing your own blog or contact blogging colleagues who may be happy to spread word of your good work.
  - 7) Be aware of any university or organizational guidelines about contacting the media. Many universities, for example, have a specific news release format that they ask you to follow. It's also good to keep your dean and communications or media relations officer in the loop if you are doing media relations work on your own.
  - 8) As with all public communications, a word of thanks to those who help will contribute to a long-term positive relationship.