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Top tips for academics engaging with the media

Dr Steph Luke and Prof Kate Dommett

In the run up to the general election many academics will be thinking about opportunities to engage with the media, but getting started, or expanding your existing work can often be challenging. In this piece, we provide top tips for those looking to do more media work. Drawing from a recent event with journalists at the PSA conference in Glasgow and from interviews with academics experienced at working with the media, we asked for their thoughts about where to get started, what makes a good media contribution and what common mistakes to avoid.

Getting started

Knowing where to start or how to grow your media work is often challenging, but there are a number of top tips to build on.

1. What's the story?

By the time most of us think about writing for the media, we've often spent months, if not years working on our topic, but that doesn't necessarily mean our findings are newsworthy. Journalists might find our work interesting, but not see how or why our work connects to the news cycle. This makes it vital for us to think about the significance of our work and how it connects to wider society. Sometimes this might mean linking our work to a current event, whilst at others it's working out which stories or findings are interesting for the audience you're trying to reach. This can be really hard, especially if you're not used to doing media work, so taking advice from your university media team or a more experienced colleague can be really helpful in working out your pitch.

Once you've worked out the key angle, then it can help to note down two or three key points you really want to get across. Especially when doing live radio or TV, it's useful to be very clear about what points or findings you want to communicate and why those findings are interesting.

2. Find publications and outlets you want to contribute to

When first thinking about the media, it can be hard to know where to start and many outlets feel really intimidating. The prospect of being on Radio 4's Today Programme or Newsnight can feel completely overwhelming and risky. So where to start? A good tactic recommended by journalists and established academics alike is to think about the media you like and consume. Are you a fan of podcasts, do you have a columnist you routinely read, or a news provider you particularly enjoy? If so, then reaching out and cultivating a relationship with journalists you like and trust is a great place to start. Similar to the decision we take as academics when choosing which journals to publish in, there are some outlets that are better suited than others to the approach we take. The media is similar, your work might not fit well with one news provider, but be great for another, so take time to identify the outlets you want to contribute to and that feature the kinds of story you want to tell.

3. Media Training and University support

If you've never done any media work, or if you're looking to try out a new type of media, then look into available media training. Most universities offer media training, including voice lessons and coaching, as well as practice sessions on speaking to camera. There are also other courses offered by funders, such as the ESRC, which are a great way to gain experience.

Within your university, you can also often get support in producing press releases, working with experienced staff to think about the key takeaways of your research and how to present your findings. You can also often sign up to media directories where journalists can search for academics with particular expertise. These can be hosted by your university, or by professional associations such as the [PSA](#).

4. Be Proactive

University media teams are great and can often help with press releases to profile your work, but with hundreds of press releases issued by universities every day, it can also help to be proactive. Our experts suggested building connections with journalists in your field of work. Journalists are often open to emails or direct messages, and they particularly value it when you give them leads or suggest stories. Our panellists at the PSA event reflected on how much they valued having academics they could go to and trust, saying that once a relationship was built 'we will come back time and time again'. It might also be worth contacting media producers or political editors, as political correspondents are usually very busy and therefore it might actually be better to go behind the scenes. Cultivating a few, high quality relationships can really work for both of you.

One increasingly common tactic used by certain academics has been to create their own Substack to profile their research and react to events in the news. Several journalists mentioned subscribing to academics' feeds and said they were a great source for stories, but also a reassuring signal that the academic was able to write in an accessible and informed way.

5. Understand your media

While the media is used as a generalised term, it is important to acknowledge that newspapers are completely different to broadcast media and that different outlets will be looking for different things. Whilst a long-form magazine might be interested in your detailed findings, a tabloid newspaper will want brevity, simplicity of language and opinion. And if you're on a short radio segment, then long answers aren't what is being looked for. Similarly, if you're asked to give a journalist a quote, then a paragraph answer won't fit the bill. Make sure you understand the format and requirement and tailor your answer to the specific needs - and if you're not sure what these are, don't be afraid to ask. Some outlets can also have editorial lines and perspectives. Newspapers in particular are often partisan, but so too are many magazines and, increasingly, TV channels, so it's important to think about the agenda of the particular outlet when deciding whether or not to take part.

6. How to engage

It's also important to recognise the many different ways you can contribute to the media. You can seek out broadcast, audio or written opportunities, and can identify particular outlets with very different agendas, working timelines and formats. If you're interested in broadcast, for example, you can look to appear on live news programmes, but also documentaries or pre-recorded segments. You can also go into the studio or, as a result of Covid, there are now more options to provide a remote contribution, which can be a less stressful way of getting involved. If you are not comfortable with being on TV, you can also engage with broadcasters by providing an explainer or background context to journalists. Alternatively you could prioritise different media such as print journalism, either providing rapid response quotes, or pitching to write a long form article with a long deadline. There is no one size fits all for media engagement, making it important to understand what you're interested in and feel most comfortable with. Remember you do not always have to say yes to every invitation, and it's easier to take up or turn down opportunities with confidence if you're already done the thinking about what works for you.

7. Think about the risks

Doing media work is great, but it's not without risks. It can be time consuming. You can become a target for online abuse, or receive negative coverage in the press. So it's important to think about the risks of doing media work, making sure you understand possible threats and actions you can take before doing any media work. This is particularly important if you research controversial or high profile issues.

One good place to start is by thinking about the information about you online. It's a good idea to do a digital clean up - spend an hour googling yourself to find out what personal information is available about you online and take steps to remove any photos, contact details or information you're not comfortable sharing. It's also a good idea to check your privacy settings to be sure you are not sharing too much personal content, and you might even consider using a pseudonym for your personal as opposed to professional social media accounts. Once you're happy with your online presence, also have a think about the type of interaction you're comfortable with. Many social media sites allow you to block certain accounts or turn off replies to your posts. Take a look at what is possible and work out what kind of interactions you feel happy with.

It's a good idea to consider potential legal risks, too. Speaking or writing in public always carries the risk of being accused of making defamatory statements, especially if you are talking about specific individuals or companies. While academics being sued for defamation in the UK is rare, there have been some worrying examples of this happening in recent years. Just like journalists, academics can mitigate risks of being sued. As well as familiarising yourself with the rudiments of defamation law, it can be a good idea to look at what legal protection you might have, or might easily be able to obtain. Check if your university has defamation insurance and whether you are covered by it. You might also check if your home insurance covers defamation (some policies do!) or consider taking out personal indemnity insurance. The best defence against a defamation claim is making sure you have your facts right - and if you did get something wrong, swift correction and clarification is often the most sensible response.

It's also important to weigh up the time doing media work takes. While getting coverage can be great, it can also take up a lot of time, and sometimes you can do a lot of preparation for an interview, only for it to be cancelled at the last minute. It's therefore useful to think about why you're doing this work. Is it to build your profile, to evidence public engagement or just for fun? Working this out can help you avoid disappointment and make it easier to judge whether you should say yes or no to a media request.

8. Start Small

Getting started with media work can feel really intimidating, especially once you think about the risks, so it's a good idea to start small and to gain experience in places that offer active support. If you're keen on writing for print media, then an outlet like The Conversation is great as they offer editorial support to help you improve the clarity of your writing, similarly blogs like UK in a Changing Europe or the LSE blogs provide editing and suggestions on how to structure your piece. If audio or broadcast media is of more interest to you, then start with local radio or small podcasts, or regional TV. These are incredibly valuable spaces for testing out and honing your skills. While some punditry opportunities might not feel initially relevant, it can help to get your foot in the door and create more opportunities to present your own research. When you're looking at where to try out, remember that journalists are often looking for new and unfamiliar voices. Indeed, many media providers are actively seeking to speak to people with different perspectives and ideas.

9. Ask questions

Particularly when doing live TV or radio, it can be daunting to not know what you're going to be asked. It's important to remember that you are a real expert and likely know much more than most people about the topic, but there are also steps you can take to feel more prepared. Don't be afraid to ask for information ahead of an interview. Although the journalist might not be able to tell you the precise questions, you can ask for general topics that will be covered, who the presenter is and what format the talk will take. You can also ask the producers if they want a sound bite or a more detailed answer. If you're being featured alongside another guest, you can ask what they will be covering and what stance they will take. Based on this information you can be clear about what you are and are not able to cover. It's also fine to say live on air that a particular topic is outside your area of expertise - you don't need to feel you have to answer a question way outside your field!

One question you might want to ask is whether you will be paid for your time. Some media outlets still pay contributors, especially if they are having to travel to the studio or work outside of normal working hours. Journalists often don't mention the option of payment, so work out if there is a reasonable case for payment and then don't be afraid to ask - they can only say no!

10. Make sure you're available

One thing we often heard journalists frustrated about was the availability of academics. The timescales of academia and journalism are often very different, and media outlets often need us to be available for comment on very short deadlines. A number of journalists spoke about their frustration at receiving a great press release, only to discover that the academic had gone on holiday and so couldn't make a comment. This makes planning when you issue press

releases, and when you decide to pursue media work really important - so make sure to develop a plan and be available on the day.

For more useful sources see:

A helpful guide from the University of Bath's Press Office:
<https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/guide-to-working-with-the-media/>

Scholars on Air. Academics and the Broadcast Media in Britain¹ The LSE GV314 Group²,
https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/59607/1/LSEGV314_Scholars_on_Air.pdf.