

'Truth is our role' – why cultivating relationships matters when it comes to academic engagement with the media.

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*Reporting back from a one-day event on the role of news and media in communicating research findings, **Judy Stephenson** shares tips from the panel and workshops on what journalists are looking for and how academics can get involved. While it is academics' responsibility to engage, and to engage well, academics require moral and practical support. The role of public engagement and press officers in providing this support is essential.*



Many academic researchers feel that media engagement is complex and challenging. It was the goal of a one-day Workshop '[Communicating impact: the role of news and media](#)' organised by LSE and IFS to demonstrate otherwise. The scope of the workshop was wider than 'impact and media' and covered the full range of communication strategies open to the academic community today.

Welcoming participants, Professor Tony Travers (LSE) pointed out that the relationship between the media and universities is vital to both. Universities have knowledge that journalists need, and the media form the narrative that research fits within. Supporting public debate is also seen as 'value for money' for funders. Paul Johnson, (IFS) highlighted how the media respect and value truly independent research, above any political allegiances. Given the attention that the IFS had received the previous day in the Brexit debate, this was heartening.



Image credit: Maria Moore

Both Johnson and Travers imparted advice that was to be reiterated throughout the day. Don't expect instant media coverage. Cultivate relationships. Journalists trust those they know for the best insights, and more importantly, journalists can be trusted.

The following panel convinced on this, and highlighted how individual relationships with writers and journalists are

key. Fran Abrams (Education Media Centre), Ed Conway (Sky News), Branwen Jeffreys (*BBC*), Soumaya Keynes (*The Economist*), and David Walker (*Guardian*) all shared their formative experiences in working with primary researchers and academics, many of them highly personal. Some invaluable tips emerged.

Firstly, Twitter is the best way to contact a journalist, and you should probably already be cultivating a relationship. Be on social media. Have a blog. (In the early days it's probably better to contribute to a well-known edited blog). If they have never heard of you or your work, the press release might not be read. Secondly, media is increasingly a visual environment; you need at least one chart! Having said this, the panel's dedication to scholarship was impressive – all described reading a great deal on the subjects they reported on. Journalists actually read the whole of your research and care about your methodology but – and this is key – readers don't. Audiences for each publication or media group differ. All the panel stressed that interpreting research is their role, even the most 'impactful' research will never be quoted verbatim.

What emerged was that in current context of increasingly political uses of 'facts' academic media engagement is more than getting your research written about. It's *much more important* than that. David Walker appealed for academic involvement in the journalist research, reminding all participants that the 'truth is our role'. To the delight of Tim Leunig and economic historians in the room, he also called for social scientists and commentators to 'do more history'.

Leunig himself was up next to talk about how he suffered the effects of a slow August news day in 2008 when Policy Exchange published [Cities Unlimited](#). He used the case to make it clear to those attending from university press offices that if academics are going to defend their research in public they need moral and practical support and it is the role of public engagement and press officers to provide it. There is an increasingly strategic role for press and public engagement offices.



Four afternoon sessions offered practical advice, case studies and Q&A. At the session on **social media and academic blogging** Chris Gilson, Helena Vieira and Sierra Williams (all of LSE) stressed the sustained work it takes to establish a blog, and gain reputation. The session also discussed social media; Twitter, despite its own management problems is still the preferred platform for all professional comment. The funding of good established blogs remains uncertain, sponsorship or other forms of commercial funding seem expected.

The session on **communicating sensitive research** with Romesh Vaitilingam, Bob Ward (LSE), Heather Rolfe

(NIESR) gave advice on ensuring that the real findings of research are not hijacked by other media debates. Bonnie Brimstone (IFS), Meghan Rainsberry (CLS, UCL Institute of Education and IFS research) used case studies to give advice on **communication planning**. They stressed managing relationships to understand the best timing for research. In the fourth session experienced producer and broadcaster Dinah Lammiman offered practical advice to researchers and PR on the opportunities in **Radio**.

The message arising from the day was clear. The relationship between academia and the media matters. It determines the standard of debate and the truth of our facts in the wider world, so it is academics' responsibility to engage, and to engage well. That the workshop gave us some good tools to get started was a bonus.

This piece is part of a series of posts from a one-day workshop, [Communicating impact: the role of news and media](#) hosted by The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). The workshop is part of the ESRC's capacity-building programme for the Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) community and focuses on ways in which the research community can communicate research findings and expert analysis most effectively, and to connect with non-academic audiences to maximise opportunities for impact.

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