

# By engaging with the media academics can enjoy benefits to their research

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*Amidst near-constant research and publication pressures, academics can sometimes shy away from public engagement activities. However, those who do so may be overlooking the potential benefits of such outreach. **Iain Begg** explains how media work in particular can help infuse research with relevance, offer a fresh perspective and reach new audiences.*



Funding bodies have become increasingly insistent on closer engagement between academics and potential users of the research they produce, yet many researchers regard these demands as, at best, a distraction. They may dutifully complete the boxes on application forms about impact or dissemination plans, but secretly hope that they will be able to avoid them, leaving more time to do the research and publish in good journals.

But does this stance overlook potential benefits and, if so, how can the effort needed to reach out to the media, in particular, be used to advantage? Three sorts of answers can be given:

## 1. Policy relevance

First, although it is important to develop methodologies and improve techniques, there is often a tendency to stop there, without regard for policy relevance or public engagement. The latter two might not win academic recognition, but there good reasons, especially for those in the social sciences, to try to answer the rhetorical question: “so what?”



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By translating theoretical or empirical work into what matters to citizens or institutions, considerable value can be added to the research, and good journalists tend to have a 'nose' for what resonates.

## **2. Building on existing research**

Second, contact with the media may raise new ideas about how to build on existing research. Even banal questions sometimes prompt fresh thought.

Also, the challenge of having to explain scientific propositions in terms that informed, but non-specialist audiences can grasp forces academics to think about how those outside academia will view the research. Involving journalists on advisory committees for research projects, contributing to policy papers and organising user seminars all boost the prospects of research applications being successful. A good, recent example is the ESRC-funded [UK in a Changing Europe Programme](#).

## **3. Reaching new audiences**

A third reason for media engagement is to ensure that research material reaches non-academic audiences that might benefit from it.

Most of us know how to connect with our academic peers: workshops, seminars, conferences and, obviously, academic publishing. Making a mark elsewhere is not necessarily straightforward, but the publicity that flows from an interview on radio, television or with a print journalist can reap unexpected rewards. Yes, they will sometimes be more concerned with a simple 'soundbite' or a polarised view rather than a more reasoned and serious analysis, but once the door opens it is up to you.

Certainly, dealing with the media takes time and, on occasion, calls for considerable patience. The junior staff employed by broadcasters to identify potential studio guests will rarely have much grasp of the subject and the programme producers will sometimes mess you around on whether or not they want the interview.

Some journalists can be very sloppy, ill-informed or – let's be blunt – downright lazy. It is not unusual to receive a request to answer half a dozen very broad questions which is tantamount to being asked to write their article for them. Others, though, will challenge research findings and push you to show why anyone should be interested.

Equally, all of us have, from time to time, cringed when we have heard academics pontificating on their pet subjects and struggled to understand them when they come out with jargon-laden waffle.

## **Communicate key points**

It helps to have a few key points when doing interviews and to express them simply. It's not unlike what makes a good abstract from an academic paper: let the readers, viewer or listeners know what is significant, novel and relevant to them. But don't try to dazzle them with your technical wizardry because it will confuse more than impress and you are, after all, already there wearing a hat marked 'expert'.

My recommendation? Give it a go, as you will find it worthwhile and, if nothing else, your mother will tell you how good you were.

*This piece originally appeared on the [LSE Communications](#) blog.*

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