

Access then impact: using the media as a shortcut to policymakers



*As the value of research with impact increases, so too does the importance of first gaining access to policymakers and other persons of influence. One shortcut to doing this is through increased media coverage. **Leigh Marshall** explains how academics can give their research the best possible chance of being seen and read by policymakers; including by developing close relationships with university communications teams, being ready to capitalise when a story relevant to your research breaks, and ensuring you have a message that decision-makers can engage with.*

There is no hiding from the impact agenda. The impact weighting of the Research Excellence Framework has been increased for 2021, and more recently the UK Government announced a new funding stream for [knowledge exchange](#). But achieving impact isn't easy, especially for researchers early in their careers.

If you ever have a spare week, or ten, it's worth reading through some of the 6,637 REF impact case studies on [the HEFCE website](#). There are some brilliant and fascinating examples of how researchers have achieved impact, but what strikes me most is how different impact looks across different subjects. At the risk of being flippant, among many of the medical or technological examples there is a familiar pattern and a clear route to impact: make breakthrough; license drug/technology; save lives/£millions.

For social and political science (not to mention economics, languages, education, philosophy, etc.) the route to impact is much more fragmented. Among the 97 sociology case studies, for example, impact comes from numerous briefings of government officials and parliamentarians, before the academics join "networks" and "committees" discussing their research and wider issues. Their research is covered by national media, they meet even more people – practitioners or third sector campaigning organisations to pass on their knowledge. And, after all that, and often a good deal more, sometimes there is a policy or practice change that can be pointed to as a direct impact, sometimes not.

Central to much of the impact is "access". Prominent and experienced academics are more likely to get on the committees, know the right journalists and government officials, and have links into third sector organisations, etc. I worked with Professor Sir John Curtice, of election night fame, for a number of years. He didn't need much support. I advised and facilitated, but after 30 years in the game he knew Whitehall (and Holyrood) inside and out – and they knew him. But many researchers, especially at the start of their careers, don't have these networks, so how can they develop them? One way is through the media.

The media as a short-cut to access

The fourth estate is as powerful as ever and achieving the right kind of media coverage can be a great shortcut to reaching decision-makers. People of influence still read a daily newspaper. If your research reaches page one or two of a quality paper people will talk about it in Westminster. It will feature in paper reviews across TV and radio. It might sneak into parliamentary questions. The phone will ring.

Moreover, being on the telly is not something limited to the most experienced and esteemed scholars. In fact, a Radio 4 journalist has told me that these academics can sometimes appear out of touch and somewhat detached from what is happening in society. Early-career academics may also come with the added benefit of cutting-edge research techniques or new methodologies. In other words, being a young new voice can be a real advantage.

So how can a young researcher raise their profile in the media?



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Get to know your communications team

I once heard Prof Curtice say to someone who questioned the effectiveness of communications staff in universities that the problem was that most academics don't know how to use them. Whether your university has an in-house team or an agency, it's time to go and meet them. There is nothing a press officer likes more than a natter over a cup of tea and it is their job to raise the profile of you and your work. They'll have great ideas for how you can promote your work and you'll be at the front of their minds when a media inquiry comes in.

Landing your research in the right way

The big opportunity is always going to be when a new piece of research you have authored publishes and it's critical to think strategically about where the news lands. My advice is to work exclusively with one journalist at your key target outlet. This allows you to develop a relationship with this journalist and, by giving an exclusive, you make it more likely that your research will be featured prominently. Because you are working closely with one journalist you should also find you get a better piece. Your press officer may push for the maximum number of articles but one in-depth piece near the front of the paper (or the top of the BBC website) is more valuable than ten short stories on page 15, for the simple reason that stories near the front of the paper get seen by more people. Hit the Today Programme in the morning as well and you're sure to reach the right people. The move to digital hasn't changed this a great deal – being near the front of the print edition also means more prominence for the story on an outlet's website. One thing that has changed is the emergence of digital briefings – the [Times Red Box](#) and the Telegraph's [Brexit Bulletin](#), for example. These won't take your research to the masses, but they are certainly read in Westminster so they're worth considering (and signing up to).

Jump on the news agenda

You can also raise your profile via the media at times when you don't have new research. Journalists are always on the lookout for credible commentators who can give an interesting perspective on a breaking story. If you can offer a point of view quickly, you can be quoted in the papers or asked to speak on the radio. This is known as "newsjacking". Essentially you need to write a paragraph that can act as a quote or pitch for radio that gives your take on a breaking story – offering some insight from your research or thoughts on what the wider implications might be.

Here's a simple, fun example I worked on with the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), after news broke that Coronation Street had agreed product placement deals with Co-op and Costa. The story broke around lunchtime and my colleague and I worked with CIM on a quick comment with a simple insight: that this move by Corrie could set a precedent for other programmes. It works for the media because it takes the story beyond just the simple news of a product placement deal to the wider implications for TV programming and, of course, marketing through product placement. [The Guardian](#) used our comment online that day and then in the next day's paper.

Think about the issues arising from your research, how they are currently discussed in the media, and what your expertise might add to that discussion. When you're reading an article and find yourself thinking "I know more about this than the journalist", that's the time to contact your media team.

Show policymakers how your work and insight can help them achieve their goals

When decision-makers do start paying attention, it's essential you have a message they can engage with. This sounds obvious, but too few researchers do it. Politicians and their advisors and officials are time-poor people in pressurised jobs; most don't have time to read and consider academic papers. What you need to do is frame your research in a way that helps them better understand or develop solutions to a current policy problem. If you can show how your research is relevant to their policy challenges and the current political or social context, they will listen, but if you just want to talk about the findings of your research, they'll switch off.

With REF submissions due in 2020 achieving impact will be at the forefront of researchers' minds. Getting your name in the media is a great shortcut to getting your work in front of the right people and, with a bit of thought and support from your media team, can be simple and rewarding.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Leigh Marshall is a Senior Account Director at the PR and content agency Good Relations where he supports a variety of organisations, in higher education and beyond, with their communications. Prior to joining Good Relations Leigh was Head of Communications at the National Centre for Social Research, where he spent five years helping researchers secure impact from their work.