Media Engagement Guide

Planning for media engagement
An important factor to consider is the time required to effectively engage with the media, including planning time, and this should be considered at the beginning of a research project and factored in to your project plan. Consider how media engagement can support your overall objectives, points in your research that would benefit from media engagement, such as at the beginning if you have a large grant to announce and are looking for partners, during if you can offer a trip to a journalist to follow a project in action, or at the end when you have new findings to publish or recommendations to influence future policies.

Media types
With the era of social media the definition of the 'media' has widened in scope and this guide focuses on engaging with the core media channels of:

- Print – including news articles, comment pieces, features
- Online – including blogs, articles, features, video interviews, photo stories (images with short descriptive text)
- Radio - including local and national news programmes and documentaries
- TV - including local and national news programmes and documentaries

Social media, including types of content – video, audio, photos, infographics, online Q&As and forums is another area that can complement more traditional media to communicate research and build your personal profile.

Target audience
Who do you primarily want to read your research and communicate your findings to? This is an important question to answer when planning your media engagement, and will help inform which types of media you engage with and how. The media is a tool through which to communicate your research to an external audience. So, rather than thinking of journalists as a target audience itself, decide which audience(s) you are aiming to reach and why, and then identify the media most likely to be consumed by the audience.

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Why?</th>
<th>Suitable media channels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>To share research findings and highlight a new methodology</td>
<td>Academic Journals, blogs</td>
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<tr>
<th>Senior civil servants in government</th>
<th>To influence a national policy change</th>
<th>National print and online and national broadcast news (radio and TV)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local community</td>
<td>Community members you want to invite to take part in a project</td>
<td>Local radio</td>
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**Key messages**

A key stage in media engagement is to identify and refine key messages that you wish to communicate. It is difficult to communicate complex research to an external audience without distilling it down to clear and concise messages. Three key messages is the ideal amount in order to make them memorable and easier to digest. As well as the content of the messages it is important to consider the language and tone you use. Think about how you want to come across and use accessible language that is free from jargon, so that you are not narrowing your audience to only fellow academics in your field.

**Key message 1 – headline point.**

Identify the most attention grabbing and central point to your research or story. For a broadcast interview this should be the one thing you want to say if you only had 30 seconds.

If you are struggling to identify your first key message test out some messages on colleagues or friends who are not familiar with your work to see which part most interests them. Also the media are often more interested in bad news, or a new problem identified so it could be a warning about an alarming finding you have uncovered or a downward trend you’ve spotted.

The first key message will form the top line of your communication and should also be the basis for a headline in a press release and the subject line in an email approach to journalists.

**Key message 2 – supporting point.**

This should be the secondary point and provide further detail and proof points such as statistics or case study examples.

**Key message 3 – call to action.**

This last message is often most effective when used as a response to the previous messages, such as a policy recommendation; a call for different research approaches in the
future, how people can find out more or promotion of a conference or event where the topic will be followed up.

Key messages should also be used consistently across different media channels when communicating a research story, for example forming the structure of a blog or the content of social media posts and infographics.

**Media tools**
Different tools can be used to engage the media and the tools you choose often depends on the time you have available and the nature of the story.

- Press release - an essential part of communicating a story to a journalist or a number of journalists and to put on a website. (There are useful resources online on how to write a press release)
- Letter to editor - a useful way to respond to an article you disagree with and make your point. Find out the correct email address to send it to and any guidelines a publication has for submitting a letter to them
- Opinion piece/blog - If you have the time this is a good way to fully control the message you want to communicate. Identify the best publication for your target audience to pitch it to using short paragraphs or bullet points. Only write it fully once the publication says they are interested.
- Short statement - one or two paragraphs offering an immediate opinion on a timely event or policy announcement that can be sent widely to relevant journalists.
- Images or Infographics - supporting aspects that can be attractive to journalists or for very good images can be pitched as a photo story with supporting captions to illustrate a project.

**Approaching journalists**
Journalists are time pressured so be as helpful as possible up front by succinctly and clearly stating the main points of your story, why they should be interested and why it is timely via email or over the phone. Also, make clear what you are offering them, such as an exclusive first look at a new report due out, access to an interview with the research author or access to a case study.

Understand that journalists have their own agendas and way of working. The most effective media engagement arises when those agendas overlap or complement to achieve a good result for both. Be open to understanding their point of view and the time pressure they may be under. Make sure you understand what deadline they are working to and ask questions to try and establish as best you can the day the story will be published, if they are interviewing other people in relation to it etc.

A good tactic is to focus on building relationships with one or two journalists from publications that are well-read by your target audience. By getting to know how they like

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to work and what they’re interested in, it will become easier to pitch stories to them and you can give them advance notice of research stories coming up.

Once you have communicated to them, be available to them to answer any follow up questions they might have. By being helpful to them they will likely come to you for opinion pieces or blogs on similar topics. This provides the double benefit of resulting in positive media coverage and also of raising your personal profile and attracting wider media interest in your work.

Using embargos
Providing a journalist with an advance copy of a research report under embargo before it is publicly launched is necessary in order for them to have time to write an article about it, or plan pre-recorded interviews with you about it. Giving a journalist as much advance notice as possible will provide the best chance for a more substantial article or broadcast feature for your story. When providing an advance copy mark it clearly throughout as embargoed until the date you have identified as the date the research will be published.

Media like to report on what is ‘new’ and within a couple of days of a report being published it can quickly be viewed as old news and it can be more difficult to interest them in the research story. This is another reason why providing embargoed material beforehand can make a research story more attractive to them.

On the record
There is a reason that the phrase ‘there is no such thing as off the record’ is so well-known. There is a risk to media engagement that your research will be misinterpreted or for example that your key messages are side-lined by a more controversial point that a journalist has identified. A good principle in general to take is only communicate to them what you would be happy to see in print and attributed to you, even when providing background information. You should also consider how the messages you communicate (verbally or in writing) could reflect on the institution you are affiliated to.

External context
When approaching a journalist with a story idea, it could be the most interesting story but they (or their editor) will often ask, 'but why is it of interest now?'. If your research story does not have an obvious timely connection already, such as the end of a four year study and the report is launching with an event etc., then you may need to an external environment scan to find something to hook it on to.

Compromise v corrections
When a media article is published do read it through thoroughly and if you spot any factual inaccuracies, such as an incorrect figure or an organisation name incorrectly spelt
do not hesitate to get in touch with the journalist or media outlet as online corrections are easily made. When it comes to style preferences or story emphasis however, it is on the whole up to the journalists’ discretion and editorial judgement. It is the work you put in beforehand on your relationship with the journalist and key messages that will provide the greatest chance for success.

**Practise**
Media engagement is an art, not a science and over time you will find what works best and through experience and by building up media contacts, you will find more success. There is also an element of luck to the process, such as when an external event beyond your control can amplify your story, or suddenly make it irrelevant. Don’t be discouraged and knowledge and confidence develops over time through trial and error.

**Promote and record**
Lastly, do not be modest about sharing media coverage that you or your work features in. Take advantage of your own social media accounts and/or your institutions accounts to share the coverage and record your coverage in order to track any impacts that were achieved as a result of it.