

THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

For International Development Research

How to do Broadcast Media Interviews

A guide for researchers

Despite the rise of social media and the pressure on researchers to tell their stories via multimedia, traditional broadcast media interviews still provide a vital channel of research communications. For some researchers this can seem a daunting prospect, but with a little preparation and the application of some common sense tips, broadcast interviews can be remarkably comfortable, rewarding and even enjoyable experiences. Moreover they can be a powerful way to instantly relay research messages to large audiences and many researchers find that they become go-to people for the media, with many follow-up requests for further interviews and comment.

Preparing for an interview

Interview requests often result from proactive media work, such as the issuing of press releases or communications work around events. Or they may come as a complete surprise and be linked to external news agendas that have no direct connection to your current activities. In most cases they will be last minute and urgent. The broadcast media work to tight deadlines and interview requests almost always require an immediate response. The media come to you because they are looking for expertise in a particular area or because of your association with a particular programme or project. They will often return to you again and again once you have delivered a successful interview because they favour 'spokespersons' who they know can deliver great interviews and are reliable and quick to respond.

Responding to an interview request - questions to ask

There are several basic things you need to find out as soon as you are contacted:

- Who is the interview for? Which media outlet and which show/programme?
- Will it be live or pre-recorded?
- Would they like you to go to a studio or can it be done by phone?
- When will you be interviewed?
- When will it be broadcast?
- Who will interview you and for roughly how long?
- Will they be talking to anybody else? Is it part of a package?
- What questions will you be asked?

Helping to shape the interview

Often you will be contacted by a researcher or producer who is talking to several potential interviewees. Your initial conversation with them may help determine whether you are the person they really want to interview on the given story or topic. In many organisations, this initial conversation may also be conducted by communications staff acting in a gatekeeper role. You may reach a mutual understanding that there is in fact a more appropriate person or organisation for them to be talking to. You may also get the opportunity to suggest to them what their line of questioning should be.

This initial conversation can help to answer a number of questions:

- Do you want to do the interview? What are the risks or opportunities?
- Would it be more appropriate for them to seek an interview elsewhere?
- Does the interview offer an opportunity to raise your own profile or the profile of your organisation in relation to a particular issue or topic?
- What facts and information might you want to find out before the interview takes place?
- How might you frame your key points?
- What is the agenda of this particular media organisation?

Developing key messages

You should go into every single broadcast interview, whatever the media outlet or topic, with a set of pre-prepared key messages or points. Most interviews are short and most listeners or viewers are only giving part of their attention to the broadcast, so what you say needs to be extremely clear. You also need to control the interview if you can. The success of an interview should be judged on whether or not you delivered your key points.

Key messages should be:

- Brief and to the point.
- Few in number: no more than 3 or 4.
- Framed for your audience.
- Geared towards the context of the interview: do they respond to the questions you anticipate being asked?
- Written down and rehearsed. Look at them just before the interview begins, but do not read from a sheet during the interview.

How to give a good interview

Appearing live on television or radio makes many people nervous, particularly if they have had limited experience of this type of activity. But a little adrenalin and some preparation can be turned into a solid interview style that will have journalists wanting you back on their programmes again and again. Many spokespersons in NGOs, government and the private sector who make regular appearances will have received media training. A few simple tricks of the trade is all it takes to really perform well in most types of interview. Plan what you want to say in advance, but be prepared to be agile and make the most of the opportunity. Most interviews are not combative and most of the time journalists are not trying to trip you up, so try to relax.

Content and context

Your delivery in an interview will be greatly enhanced if you concentrate on getting the content and style right. Think about what you are going to say and how you can say it in such a way that it will resonate with your audience.

- Prepare 3 or 4 things you want to say and say them.
- Avoid making abstract points.
- Make sure each of your key points are different.
- Be clear and concise.
- Frame your points for the audience you are speaking to – comparisons with ‘home’ when talking to domestic media on international issues for instance is always very effective. Try to make what you say relevant to your listeners – you need them to care.
- Think about the wider context – what is happening locally and globally and can you make any connections?

Basic Interview techniques

- The same principles of good clear oral communication that apply in life generally will apply in a broadcast interview setting. With just a few minutes or even seconds to make your point you need to focus on a few techniques that will make a huge difference in how well listeners or viewers take on board what you are saying. Being an expert on a subject is not enough. In fact, the “curse of knowledge” can be a major barrier to effective communications. You need to keep it simple and illustrate your points with examples and stories where possible, particularly human interest

stories. For example if you have been in the field and can illustrate your point with a description of a real person's predicament this is instantly more memorable than facts and figures. Repeat the name of your organisation at least once, e.g. 'at the Institute of Development Studies we are looking at...'

- Try to slow down. When you are under pressure it is easy to talk too quickly.
- If a story is hard to think of, try making an analogy: can you 'paint a picture'?
- Killer facts are always good but in most short interviews one or perhaps two such facts (especially statistics) is normally enough. Multiple stats are instantly forgettable and sometimes downright confusing.
- Avoid abstract language or jargon at all costs.
- Apply the 'ordinary person test' to your key points. Will they be understood by someone who is interested but under-informed?
- Stay positive and respect your audience. An interviewee who becomes visibly bored or irritated by the interviewer can quickly lose the sympathy of her audience. Never lose your temper.

Common themes and questions

Journalists all over the world have developed very similar styles of interviewing and whatever the location and type of media you are dealing with, some very common lines of questioning tend to come up. By anticipating these and framing your points around them, or simply being ready for these types of question, you can really make the most of an interview. Common themes are:

- What is the current situation? Will it get better or worse?
- Who are the heroes and villains?
- What needs to be done and by whom?
- How will it be paid for?
- SO WHAT? (This is a particular favourite for researchers!)

Controlling the interview

Remember that in most cases you will have prepared for the interview and been briefed on what the line of questioning should be. But many interviewers get off the point or simply misunderstand the nature of your research. In some cases, they may deliberately try and move you onto another area which you had not agreed to talk about.

- If you are asked a question that is not in the area you were prepared to comment on, try to return the conversation back to your messages: "That is an interesting question but in fact the real issue is ..." This is known as 'Bridging'.
- Do not worry that Bridging may seem evasive: you are an expert in an area with real legitimacy to talk about a specific topic. Questions that take you into other territory can be sidestepped.
- When asked an unexpected or difficult question, pause and think about your response. Never just say the first thing that pops into your head. Short pauses sound and look fine in interviews.
- Do not feel that you must be able to answer every question. It is a reasonable response to say: "Sorry I am not familiar with that particular case and cannot comment." Or "My research does not really relate to that area." Then bridge back to your key points.
- Know when to stop. Make your point and then stop talking. It is easy to ramble on and get off the point.
- Some repetition of key points or messages is acceptable, but do not leave your most important point too late as some interviews are very short and you may never get to deliver it.

Different types of interview

- Live interviews can seem particularly daunting, but most people give their best performances when live. Always check before the interview whether it will be broadcast live.
- Pre-recorded interviews do allow for requests to stop and start again if you become tongue tied, need clarification or want to rethink your response.
- Formats that allow listeners to phone-in or include panels of interviewees are far less predictable and it is much more difficult to manage the interview

- Down the Line interviews (DTL) where you speak to a camera with questions delivered via an earpiece can seem very strange. Maintain good eye contact with the camera and leave a pause between question and answer in case of time delay. This also applies to SKYPE interviews..
- DTLs frequently consist of just two questions.
- If you get the chance always opt to go into a studio: it facilitates a better, and often longer interview than down a phone line or over Skype.

Body language and personal presentation

- Be careful not to start automatically nodding throughout the interviewer's questions: they may be saying something you actually disagree with!
- Don't fidget and always try to keep your legs and feet still. On radio, nervous ticks like tapping the desk or shuffling papers will be picked up by the microphone.
- When talking keep hand gestures to a minimum.
- Assume the camera is always on you and the microphone is always switched on.
- At a studio always accept makeup if offered: studio lights and cameras are not always flattering.
- For TV you may want to dress smartly but you must feel comfortable.
- When choosing an outfit consider cultural sensitivities and avoid clothes that carry logos, pictures or words.
- A drink of water just before the interview is fine, but avoid fizzy drinks or food.
- If delivering an interview from home or work be careful to avoid background noise or interruptions and if on Skype think carefully about the backdrop. A neutral wall or tidy bookcase usually looks good, but check what exactly is going to be in shot.
- Don't be late! Allow extra travel time. Test your Skype login and connectivity beforehand.

After the interview

- Do not be surprised if after the interview broadcasters simply let you go or ring off without much ceremony.
- Remember to assume microphones are still on until you are out of the studio or off line.
- Accept that the interview may be edited. Airtime can be limited. Don't be disheartened by cuts.
- Listen to your interview – it may be uncomfortable, but it may help you to learn and improve.
- Get feedback on your performance from colleagues and communication staff if possible (a debrief). There are always things to learn from every interview and the nature of the questioning is often of real interest to others.
- Follow up with producers and journalists who contacted you and thank them, unless communications staff are doing this for you. This also provides an opportunity to request broadcast times or links to previously broadcasted material.

Remember that broadcast interviews can be a powerful tool for communicating your research to a mass audience. They are especially useful for reaching non-specialists and the wider public. And giving interviews is a skill which improves with practice, so the more interviews you give, the easier they become.

The Impact Initiative for International Development Research exists to increase the uptake and impact of two programmes of research funded through the ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership. These are: (i) The Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation, and (ii) The Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems programme. The Initiative helps identify synergies between these programmes and their grant holders, and supports them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities and facilitates mutual learning. The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

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