

C I H R M E D I A G U I D E

The Research-Media Partnership

“ *The care and feeding of journalists* ”



CIHR IRSC

Canadian Institutes of
Health Research

Instituts de recherche
en santé du Canada

Canada

Canadian Institutes of Health Research
160 Elgin Street, 9th Floor
Address Locator 4809A
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0W9 Canada
Telephone: 613-941-2672
Fax: 613-954-1800
E-mail: mediarelations@cihr-irsc.gc.ca
www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL
Health & Wellbeing



RESEARCH MONEY

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Science



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The Research-Media Partnership

The care and feeding of journalists

As a member of the CIHR family, your work is potentially of interest to the media and the audiences they serve. The research-media interaction can be a great opportunity for you to share your knowledge and enthusiasm and promote the work of CIHR.

Of course, like any partnership, working with the media can have its ups and downs. Have you ever heard a colleague, or maybe yourself, say something like “I can’t believe that my 25-minute interview ended up as a 15-second sound bite”? This guide will help you get beyond that media-induced exasperation. The better you understand how the mass media works, the easier it will be to communicate your research to the public.

This guide is designed to make you media savvy, to help you respond to a call from a journalist and see it as a professional opportunity—the chance to share important research with thousands or millions of people.

For CIHR, professional interaction with the media is essential for three main reasons:

1. Media coverage is a key part of research translation

The professional journal article is one step in the research communication process. Coverage in the mass media is another. The popularization of research:



- Provides researchers with critical public feedback;
- Is a powerful force for cross-disciplinary communication;
- Increases future professional reference to research journal articles;
- Informs the public and decision-makers.

2. The media significantly influences funding decisions for universities, hospitals and research granting agencies

Positive media coverage of CIHR and its grant recipients promotes federally-funded research in that it:

- Demonstrates both the accountability and relevance of the research;
- Demonstrates the value of public investment in Canadian research;
- Boosts federal and provincial research policy.

3. Canadians want to hear about your research

Canadians have an enormous appetite for research results of all kinds. This interest in research is manifest in such daily science/research-based TV news shows, *@Discovery.ca* and the Discovery Health channel. The media is also the public's single most important information source on science and health.

Canadians have an enormous appetite for research results of all kinds



The Media

Inside the Black Box

When dealing with the media, think of yourself as a research ambassador. The better you understand media culture, the better you can represent your own.

All journalists
live by
merciless
deadlines

What, for example, are the professional motivations and challenges of the journalist on the other end of the phone? And how does a story move from the lab or library to an item on the TV news? This process can seem as complicated to the uninitiated as the details of a newly discovered protein pathway are to a TV V-jay. Here's a brief behind-the-scenes look at the key aspects of the mass media universe.

1. Mass media is an entertainment and news business

Why did Harrison Ford's picture receive more space than the announcement of your research results? In a highly competitive business, editors and producers must appeal to a broad, popular audience.

Tip: It's essential to make your message as accessible as possible.

Think: How does your research touch Canadians' daily lives?

2. Here today, gone tomorrow

All journalists live by merciless deadlines. This is particularly true in TV and radio.

Tip: When dealing with a journalist, it's critical to reply promptly and understand the particular timeline involved.

Ask: What's your deadline?



3. News is the first draft of history

First drafts inevitably contain errors. And, getting a news story to print or broadcast is a complex information transfer process. One media analyst estimates that the daily media has an error rate as high as 10 - 25%.

Tip: Minimize the level of error by being concise and providing written background material.

4. Journalists don't write headlines

Headline writers write headlines, and they are often under pressure to pump-up the text. A sensational or misleading headline may annoy the reporter as much as it does you.

A sensational or misleading headline may annoy the reporter as much as it does you



The Media and Researchers

Researchers are from Mars, journalists are from Venus

Researchers may feel like you and the journalist are living in different worlds. You are. The two professions use different language, have distinct professional customs and operate in different time zones. Once you understand these differences you'll be able to communicate more effectively with the media.

1. Peer Review vs. the Scoop

In contrast to peer review, it's part of the journalist's code of ethics to keep the final content of a story under wraps until it goes to print or air. This practice is a firewall to maintain journalistic objectivity. The guideline can, however, sometimes be bent when it comes to complex research.

Tip: Don't insist on seeing a whole story before it goes to print. However, when the content is complex, it's appropriate to offer to review particular sections of an article. Keep comments factual.

2. The Inverted Pyramid

Want to turn a scientific journal article into a news story? Turn it upside down and lead with the conclusion. Whereas the final results in a research paper are contained at the end, to the mass media these results *are* the story.

Tip: Share the detailed conclusions first.





3. The 8-Year-Old Rule

Like all professions, yours has developed specialized language to communicate specific details. But, technical terms can leave even a science writer grasping for context. The mass media communicates with a broad audience of varying backgrounds and levels of education. If the message isn't clear, the audience will “switch off”.

Tip: Explain your research as you would to a bright eight-year-old. Use uncomplicated language—avoid jargon, acronyms and technical terms.

4. Time Lines

Researchers accustomed to multi-year research projects are often annoyed by the mass media's rapid-fire race to print or broadcast research results. However, while a research project takes years to accomplish, the daily media operates in hours, and sometimes even minutes.

Tip: Understand and respect journalists' deadlines.

The mass media communicates with a broad audience of varying backgrounds and levels of education

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Health & Wellbeing



Ms Manners meets the 5th Estate

General guidelines for working with journalists

If a question is outside your immediate domain, say so

Once you have a general sense of how the media operates, there are several basic rules of etiquette when dealing with the media.

Respond promptly to media enquiries

One of the best ways to maintain positive ties, and increase media coverage of CIHR or a research project is to provide timely replies. If you can't respond immediately to a request for an interview, call the journalist to say when you can talk or, if appropriate, pass the request on to a colleague and follow up with the journalist.

Stick to the facts

The easiest way to avoid coverage you don't like is to stick to the facts (rather than opinion) as they relate to your research, program or policy. If a question is outside your immediate domain, say so. Avoid personal comments or opinions about political issues, management policies, activities and/or staff.

There is no such thing as “Off-the-record”

Really. While it might make for cinematic intrigue, in practice it's disastrous. For the journalist, everything you say is potentially useable.

Tell the truth (even if it hurts!)

Fibbing is bad manners under most circumstances, but a potential quagmire with the media. To a reporter, a lie, however small, has the smell of larger scandal. It also seriously reduces your long-term credibility.



Never say “No comment”

“No comment” stonewalls journalists and implies a level of culpability to listeners, regardless of the truth of the situation. There is always a more tactful answer. For example: *“I can’t respond to questions at this time”* or *“I think my comments would be premature.”*

Maintain a professional relationship

Like all professionals, most journalists are highly conscientious and want their work to be accurate and high-quality. Maintaining a professional relationship based on respect, humour and cordiality, will, in time, create a strong and mutually beneficial relationship.

Hot issue? Designate a spokesperson

For complex issues it is often best to identify one person to field media enquiries in order to ensure a consistent and clear message.

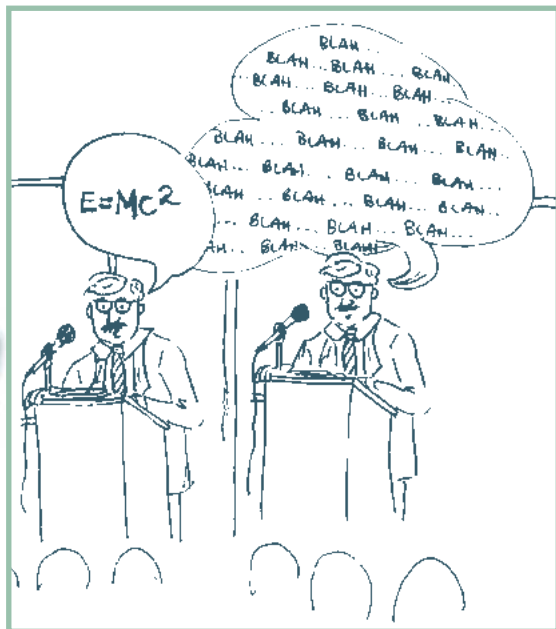
Like all professionals, most journalists are highly conscientious and want their work to be accurate and high-quality



Quick Tips to Popularizing Research

From myocardial infarction to heart attack

- Popularize your message; if you don't, the journalist will



- Take the time to educate journalists

Most reporters deal with a wide array of topics, and by necessity are skilled generalists. Take the time to provide journalists with necessary background information. You will ensure a more accurate story, while at the same time building a relationship as a helpful source.



- **Use popular analogies to make your message clear**

Example: “Think of your intestines as a coiled hose...”

- **Use concrete examples**

Example: “Smoking is one of the top public health issues in Canada—almost every person in Canada knows one of the 45,000 people who die of smoking-related diseases each year.”

- **If using scientific or technical terms, repeat the idea/fact in common terms**

Example: “The drug we’re developing targets late-stage metastasis, or *cancer that has significantly spread throughout the body.*”

- **Use visual aids whenever possible to emphasize your point**

This is the age-old wisdom of ‘show and tell’. Most peoples learn with their eyes. So no matter what you say, people often remember what they see. Offer to use pictures, video footage (if TV), graphs, or real objects to get across your point.

- **Avoid words that invite sensational coverage**

Examples: “breakthrough”, or “stupid”.

This is the age-old wisdom of ‘show and tell’.

Most peoples learn with their eyes



The Interview

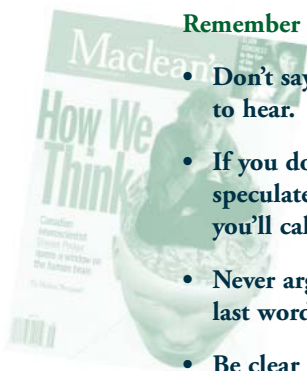
Get in the passenger seat with the map

The interview is the bread and butter of media-research interaction. Yet, the thought of doing a media interview is unnerving for many people. This anxiety is often caused by the perception that in an interview you will be a powerless object at the whim of a journalist's questions.

BUT, as the interviewee you have an agenda and are in a powerful position to share your message. To use an analogy, the interviewer is driving the car, but you hold the road map. You must know where you want to go and how to get there.

Remember the following universal interview guidelines:

- Don't say anything that you don't want the whole world to hear.
- If you don't know the answer, say so. Don't guess or speculate. With phone interviews, tell the reporter you'll call back or send any missing information.
- Never argue with a reporter. Reporters always have the last word.
- Be clear from the start on whose behalf you're speaking. Do you represent the granting agency, your university or hospital, your research team, yourself?
- Respond to questions in your own terms. Don't let journalists put words in your mouth.
- If the journalists fail to ask a key question, you can raise it yourself.



The Interview

Prepare, Perform, Post-Script

An interview, like a friendly sports match, has three stages: the preparatory warm-up, in which you go through the motions; the game itself; and the post-game locker room follow-up. Each of these stages is important to a successful interview.

PRE-INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

Be prepared. That way you'll be relaxed and at your best in the interview. Here's one routine for a vigorous pre-interview workout.

Be proactive. Ask the journalist the following questions based on the medium involved, i.e. print or broadcast:

- a. What's the journalist's name, phone number, and media organization—so you'll be able to follow-up if necessary, and pass the information on to your public affairs and media relations division.
- b. What's the focus of the interview/story?
- c. What's the deadline?
- d. How long will the interview last, and where will it be conducted?
- e. When will the story to be printed/broadcast?
- f. Is anyone else being interviewed on the subject?
- g. Is the interview part of a longer feature or story, or will it stand on its own?
- h. Will the interview be live or taped? (TV/Radio)

Be prepared.

That way

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RESEARCH
MONEY



Media

deadlines and

studio locations

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television

interviews take

place

next wave

Once you know the answers to these questions, you can decide if you want to—or are the appropriate person to—give the interview. If the answer is ‘Yes’, then it’s time to prepare.

1. Arrange the interview at a time and place that suits your comfort level

When you get a call for an immediate phone interview, you may well want time to think. Take it.

Arrange a time to call back, respecting the journalist’s deadline—perhaps in 15 minutes.

When arranging a phone interview, make sure to find a quiet room in which you won’t be disturbed. Media deadlines and studio locations will often dictate when and where radio and television interviews take place. But there’s always room for congenial negotiation.

2. Prepare 3 key messages

Write down the three (3) concise key messages that you want get across to the public.

These three messages are your mantra, the essence of what you want to say. For example: research results and their relevance to the public; or the benefits of CIHR policy. TV and radio interviews will often involve a pre-interview by a producer. This is an ideal time to drive home your key messages and thereby steer the path for the interview.



3. Practise your messages

Practise making your key points in 15 to 20 seconds. Brief quotes are more likely to be used—especially on TV and radio. If you can get your point across in 15 seconds, you'll probably get to deliver that message to the public in your own words. Ask a colleague to listen to your key points and offer feedback. While this might feel awkward, it's better to practice with a friend than on national TV.

Clearly and
powerfully
share your
messages during
the interview

4. Anticipate negative questions and practise responses

Have someone in Communications or a colleague play devil's advocate and rehearse your responses to difficult questions you may be asked.

THE INTERVIEW

Be message-rather than question-driven

Here are five concrete steps for achieving your interview goal to clearly and powerfully share your messages during the interview.

- **Three-Step Answering: “Why is the sky blue?”**
First, summarize your key message. (“There’s a physical reason why the sky is blue.”) Allow the interviewer to ask you to expand the answer. (“It’s blue because this is the component colour of white light that isn’t absorbed by the Earth’s atmosphere. When you see a rainbow, you’re



When dealing with sensitive topics, say only as much as is necessary

seeing all of the colour components of white light.”) Then re-iterate your key point. (“So the sky is blue because all of the other colours of light are absorbed by the atmosphere.”)

- **Listen carefully**

Questions can often be vague, emotional or multiple. Whatever the case may be, focus your answer so it is clear, pointed and calm.

- **Bridge answers**

If a question doesn't directly allow you to convey your full message, answer the question directly, and then use a bridging phrase to allow you to broaden your message. Bridging phrases include: *The key point here is that...; Another way of looking at this is...*

- **Keep answers focused and concise**

This is particularly important with difficult interviews. When dealing with sensitive topics, say only as much as is necessary. Answer questions directly, then return to your central messages.

- **Avoid simple 'Yes' or 'No' answers**

These one-word responses are an interview flop. Elaborate at least minimally on each point.



POST-INTERVIEW

After the interview, offer to provide the journalist with written reference material—a press release, journal article, or other background material. This is one of the best ways to increase the accuracy of the coverage because now the journalist doesn't have to prepare a complex story solely from scrawled notes and a possibly incomplete interview. Other tips:

- Suggest another expert source for the story;
- Let the journalist know about your latest research;
- Invite the journalist to your lab;
- Keep a record of what you said, especially in difficult interviews;
- Advise your communications people so that they can track your story.

Want a copy?

The easiest way to get a copy of an article or broadcast is to ask your university or research institute's Public Affairs Division for one.

Offer to
provide the
journalist with
written
reference
material



Radio and TV

When the red light goes on

An interview is a professional activity that requires professional attire

The picture's worth a thousand words

Television and radio interviews are performances—there is an audience, though you can't see it at the time. Given this fact, here are several points to remember in broadcast interviews. Research indicates that only 7% of our TV message comes from our choice of words. The vast majority of the message is based on appearance (55%), and tone and attitude (38%).

Treat the interview as a conversation with one person

This will foster a relaxed, conversational tone.

Look at the interviewer, not the camera in a person-to-person TV interview

For 'double-enders', in which you're interviewed by phone while being filmed, look into the camera.

Dress for the camera

An interview is a professional activity that requires professional attire. So, choose clothing that makes you feel professionally comfortable. Avoid visual distractions: very bright white or primary colours; loudly patterned materials; and glinty or dangling jewellery. Ask if the producer has any preferences—some colours might not work well in a given studio.

Location, Location, Location

For television interviews, choose a location in which your institution and CIHR's logo is clearly visible in the shot.



What to do when the media get it wrong

(!*%#!*&@#!*)

Everyone makes mistakes. All journalists are under a variety of structural constraints (space or deadlines) that limit their ability to use all of an interview. So it's important to make a distinction between a severely edited quote/statement and a *misquote* i.e. one that's just plain wrong. There are also cases when we're shocked to see our words in print, but in fact did say them. But, if you've been misquoted there are numerous avenues of recourse. To begin the journey:

- Talk to the media relations folks;
- Get your frustration out with someone, or something, other than the journalist;
- Correct factual errors by e-mail or letter. Otherwise, the error will remain in the media archives and may be repeated in later stories.



If you've been misquoted there are numerous avenues of recourse



Your Communications Specialists



Like most research, media relations is a collaborative effort that involves a wide array of players: journalists; communications and media relations officers; researchers; and granting agency members and staff. To smooth this process, CIHR's Communications Branch offers media relations support to members of Governing Council, staff, Institute spokespersons and research grant recipients. That support includes:

- Training for dealing with the media;
- Help preparing for interviews;
- Support in follow-up with journalists;
- Information on individual journalists or media organizations;
- Information on media coverage ("tracking") of particular stories or individuals.

A note on bilingual Canada

Media interviews/requests from CIHR staff are available in French and English. If you don't feel comfortable doing media interviews in one or the other of Canada's official languages, arrange for someone else to respond to those media requests.

Acknowledging CIHR

In order for CIHR to communicate research developments or discoveries effectively and maximize visibility for both CIHR and the researcher's organization, close collaboration between the lead investigator, his or her institution and CIHR is essential when planning and implementing public



announcements of research findings. News releases or a news conference as well as any written material produced to promote findings by CIHR-funded researchers must have the joint approval of the University Vice-President of Research (or their delegate), the President of CIHR (or his/her delegate) and the lead investigator(s).

CIHR-funded researchers should inform, in advance, the office of the Vice-President of Research and CIHR, through the CIHR University Delegate, of all significant reporting of knowledge marked for publication in a scientific journal.



COMMUNICATIONS CONTACT INFORMATION:

Director:

Karen Spierkel

Director, Marketing and Communications

kspierkel@cihr-irsc.gc.ca

613-954-1812



Media Specialist:

David Coulombe

mediarelations@cihr-irsc.gc.ca

613-941-4563

Your feedback on this guide will help improve future editions. Please send us your comments.

