



Sociological Practice Brief

Committee on Sociological Practice

Media Training for Sociologists Heather Downs and Julie B. Wiest

WHY DO SOCIOLOGISTS NEED MEDIA TRAINING?

Academics seem to be under increased pressure to prove their own worth, as well as that of their university and discipline. An article, interview, or news story is frequently used as proof of the effectiveness of one's program or the importance of one's scholarship. With the vast reach of the Internet, 24-hour news networks, and social media, expectations—and opportunities—for academics to operate effectively in an increasingly media-saturated world have increased. Here are just a few of the benefits of media training for sociologists, their institutions, and the discipline:

- Media stories featuring or written by sociologists can increase general knowledge about sociology, who we are, and what we do. This exposure also may provide more legitimacy for sociological work in the public's eye and help recruit new sociologists.
- News media exposure is free publicity for one's institution. Universities and colleges are facing increased competition, and good publicity can improve the public image of the institution, assist in the recruitment of the best students and faculty, and attract donors.
- Media exposure can be a fantastic networking tool. Promoting one's work in the media can lead to new job opportunities, new research collaborations, speaking engagements, and publications.

SOME MEDIA BASICS

Understanding how media outlets operate can improve one's relationship with journalists, reduce frustration when working with media outlets, and increase one's chances of successfully promoting one's work.

- Journalists are interested in stories that incorporate one or more of the seven traditional news values: timeliness, impact, prominence, proximity, unusualness, conflict, and human interest. When attempting to publicize work or offering expertise for a news story, be sure to emphasize the applicable news values.
- Journalists work on tight deadlines and generally need quick call-backs from sources.
- Journalists will be more responsive to op-eds, columns, and press releases that are publication ready. Try to write like a journalist: written pieces should not exceed lengths that are typical for that publication, should avoid discipline-specific jargon, and should follow the publication's style. (Most print and online media outlets follow Associated Press style.)

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MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Academics are frequently called upon to serve as expert sources for news media stories. There are several things to consider before, during, and after giving a media interview.

Preparing for a print interview (newspapers, magazines, blogs, trade publications, etc.)

- Avoid the on-the-spot interview. If contacted by a reporter, ask what she or he is interested in knowing and her or his deadline. Then tell her or him that you will call back.
- Before calling back well ahead of deadline, spend some time gathering needed information and organizing your thoughts. Find recent studies on the topic, review your own work, and search for official statements from relevant groups. Create your own talking points and try to anticipate follow-up questions. Try to develop one or two sentences that succinctly and clearly state the overall lesson you would want readers/viewers to remember.
- If you do not want to do the interview, recommending someone who is willing to speak with the reporter is polite, if appropriate.

Preparing for an on-air interview (television, radio, documentaries, online video, etc.)

- If you will be seen by viewers, be sure to dress professionally and simply; avoid bright colors and complicated patterns.
- For on-camera interviews, maintain eye contact with the interviewer and avoid making furtive glances at the camera.
- To help you prepare, be sure you know the setting of the interview ahead of time and whether or not you will be the sole speaker or among several panelists.
- Practice enunciating your words and speaking without fillers (e.g., “uh,” “um,” “you know,” etc.).
- If it is not a live interview, keep in mind that the video usually will be edited and viewers/listeners may not hear the questions posed. Restating the question in your answer and speaking in complete sentences is generally appreciated.

During the interview

- Think before you speak. You cannot take back what you say to a reporter, nor are you likely to be permitted to review the story before it is printed or airs. Take a moment to think about each question and frame a clear, succinct, and jargon-free response (to avoid being misquoted).
- If you would like to offer any information that you do not want published, clearly state that it is “off the record” *before* providing the information. Oftentimes, however, remaining silent is better in these cases, as journalists generally do not want information they cannot use in print or on air.
- If you do not know the answer to a question or prefer not to answer (especially for controversial topics), simply say “I have no comment about that” or indicate that the subject falls outside of your area of expertise.

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- As the interview winds down, offer to repeat or clarify any information the reporter is unsure about. Provide spellings for all names you mention, and double-check that the reporter knows how to spell your name, your exact title, and your institutional affiliation.

After the interview is printed or airs

- Send a copy or link to your dean, division chairs, university marketing or press officer, and other interested parties.
- Email the reporter to thank him or her for the opportunity.
- Include the citation on your CV, yearly faculty activities report, and tenure/promotion file.

WRITING FOR THE MEDIA

If you want more control over your contributions to media outlets, you can consider writing your own media pieces. You may even be asked by media outlets to write a short column or opinion piece. There are several different kinds of media writing you can consider.

- **Op-eds:** Op-eds generally are written by experts offering their informed opinions on issues or events that are currently in the news, and they may be published in newspapers, magazine, blogs, and trade publications. You may be asked to write an op-ed, or you can write one and send it to media outlets unsolicited (contact the op-ed editor or editorial page editor). Be sure your op-ed is timely, adheres to that publication's established word count and style, and offers a fresh perspective on the issue or event you are discussing. You can send your op-ed to more than one media outlet at the same time, but some outlets require first publication rights or exclusivity, so be sure to check on those preferences if you have your heart set on a particular publication.
- **Columns:** Columnists generally are well-known experts in their field and write regular, scheduled columns for publications about particular topics. See if your local newspaper is looking for a columnist in your area of expertise, or contact the editorial page editor to offer to serve as a periodic guest columnist.
- **Blogs:** You can start your own blog or contribute to an existing one. For example, Huffington Post allows academics to contribute single opinion pieces or maintain a regular blog on its site. Many professional organizations also maintain blogs to which members can contribute.

INCREASING YOUR MEDIA EXPOSURE

You do not have to sit back and wait to have your work "discovered" by a reporter. There are several things you can do to increase exposure for your work, your university, and yourself.

- Most universities maintain a list of faculty members willing to speak to the media, along with their areas of expertise. These lists are either made available to local media outlets, or your university's press office refers to it when contacted by reporters. If you are willing to speak to the media about your areas of expertise, contact your university's press office and get on that list.

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- Introduce yourself to the internal marketing or press officer, tell him or her about your areas of research, and let him or her know that you are willing to serve as an expert. And do not forget to send periodic updates about your current research projects, grants and awards you have received, and your students' activities; officers are always looking for faculty and student accomplishments to promote to both internal and external audiences.
- Learn how to write a press release, especially if you do not have a university press officer or faculty liaison. Talk to a public relations professor at your university or check out a how-to book at your library. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the Associated Press Stylebook, which outlines the standard journalistic writing style. Writing like a journalist (and, thus, minimizing the need for editing and rewriting) will increase the chances that your press release gets picked up by media outlets.
- Do not be afraid to reach out to local reporters who cover higher education or subjects related to your area of expertise. Look for contact information on the publication website, or contact an editor or producer to find out to whom you should speak. Reporters are always looking for good contacts and will appreciate your willingness to help.
- Keep up with news so you know what is going on, the history of news stories, and the relevant contexts. This activity also will help you identify what information has not been covered and what contributions you could offer (as an expert source or opinion writer).
- Get on social media. LinkedIn and Twitter are excellent outlets for promoting your current projects and recently published work. You can also consider launching your own website, with information about your areas of expertise, publications, teaching philosophy, current research projects, and upcoming presentations.
- If you find yourself in demand or plan to give regular media interviews (especially on air), you may want to consider attending a media training class or hiring a media coach.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here are several additional resources that may help you to become more media savvy and start promoting your work.

- The Poynter Institute (<http://www.poynter.org/>) offers information and training that is intended for journalists but is valuable for anyone who wants to understand journalism better.
 - The Public Relations Society of America (<http://www.prsa.org/>) offers information and training for improving public relations and communication skills.
 - The Op-Ed Project (<http://www.theopedproject.org/>) is a resource that seeks to increase the range of voices and quality of ideas that appear in media.
 - SheSource (<http://www.shesource.org/>) is a repository of female experts available to speak on diverse topics.
 - The Women's Media Center (<http://www.womensmediacenter.com/>) works to increase the visibility and power of women in the media.
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