

Engaging with the media

CERI User Guide

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Acknowledgement

This chapter of the User Guide is one in a series available from [The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre website](#).

It was prepared by members of the CERI Coordinating Group to provide practical tips on knowledge mobilisation and science communication for researchers working in the prevention of chronic disease.

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Why engage with the media?

When disseminating messages for the public or decision makers, engaging with the media can be a valuable strategy, because:

- Established media have wide audience reach. For example, in 2020:
 - The Conversation Australia/NZ reached 8.2 million users online and 18.8 million through republication
 - ABC News web reached 9.7 million users per week
 - The Sydney Morning Herald reached 9.3 million monthly readers
- The media has a major role in setting the political agenda
- The media frames public discourse (e.g. media discussions around the nanny state, COVID public health measures)
- It is our responsibility to counter unhelpful media messaging
- Media coverage raises an individual's or organisation's profile – establishing you as a trusted source for further coverage

Types of media in Australia

The media falls into three categories: web, broadcast and print.

The landscape is rapidly changing to one in which consumers access content online. They get their news from social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc), as well as online reviews, Google searches, company websites and forum threads.

Television and radio remain valuable sources of news and information.

Print publications are now the least accessed source.

There are fewer journalists and fewer traditional media outlets. This means it is more difficult than ever before to get media coverage.

Writing your own articles for publication on your website and disseminating them yourself to target audiences can overcome this problem.

Source: Meltwater

Choose the media source

As with all forms of communication, the first step is to identify the audience and then which media outlets will target them most successfully. Be strategic, consider what is topical and to whom it might be of interest.

Think about the key messages and takeaways coming out of your research that might be of most interest to a general audience, and the most appropriate media source that might pick up those messages.

What might interest the media?

Researchers can be of use to the media for the following reasons.

- A particularly newsworthy or exciting research finding. This is the first time the story has been told. They will be particularly interested if they have the story exclusively.
- A fresh angle on an existing story. In the days after a story breaks, journalists are always looking for new ways of keeping it in the news. Read widely and identify how you can continue the conversation.
- An expert opinion or reaction on a newsworthy topic. They will ask you for your interpretation of a subject and you will need to be able to make generalisations beyond what your specific research has covered (e.g. the epidemiologists who are interviewed about COVID sum up and interpret the whole body of research on the subject, not just their own modelling).
- A case study (real life story) around a newsworthy topic. For example, if there is a big issue around obesity in Australia, you might offer a story on how your research presents this problem through a new and interesting lens.

Before you approach the media

- Check the background of the journalist and their media organisation. Who are their audience and what is the purpose of the interview? They are the gateway to their audience, so concentrate on information that is useful to the audience. For example, if it's a journalist from a teachers' journal, you would obviously focus on statistics and facts relevant to teachers (even if these aren't the key findings of the research).
- Prepare your key messages. Write them in short, sharp, plain language and remember them as talking points.
- Be sure you know your institutional key messages and anything you should avoid saying.
- Make sure you are available for interview.
- PRACTICE. Describe your research in lay language and at all costs avoid jargon. Talk as if to an interested 16 year-old.
- Be as concise as possible.
- Anticipate potential questions, and prepare some succinct responses.
- Be prepared to be asked questions that are off-topic. Even if these don't relate to your specific research, you will know how to answer them because of your expertise in this area.

Ways of engaging with the media

There are different ways of attracting media attention:

- Hold a press conference or other event (mainly for issues with potential for far reaching public interest)
- Liaise with your institutional media team, to coordinate a media release
- Contact an individual journalist (with assistance of your media team)
- Submit an opinion piece or blog
- Use social media

Hold a press conference

If your news is really important, it may be worth holding a press conference. Alternatively, you could invite media to cover an event, such as a conference or report launch.

Make sure you have everything the journalists will need – people to interview, background briefings, reports, facts and figures, and case studies. If you invite broadcast media, they will need something to film ie not just talking heads but moving pictures.

Time the press conference early in the day if possible.

Promote the press conference to the media well in advance and send reminders. Make sure the alert contains a compelling reason for them to attend.

Things to consider when crafting a media release

Most researchers would prepare a media release with the assistance of their institutional communications team. However, if your CRE wants to send out its own release (see Content creation chapter), here is what to consider when sending out:

- Make sure you have approval for the media release, including all quotes. This would generally be from a department head or similar, and this needs to be factored into the timing.
- Define the audience of journalists you want to target. Is this for a general or specialist audience? For example, your media release might not be of general interest but might be better targeted at health reporters or trade publications.
- Decide on the timing. Morning is best, as newspapers usually finalise stories by late afternoon and television by early afternoon. Radio news reports are hourly, so at the beginning of the hour is best.
- Often media releases are sent to selected journalists in advance, under strict embargo (i.e. you are asking the journalist not to publish until a specified time). Generally, journalists like to break a story themselves, so sending it to one journalist only may increase the likelihood they will cover it. Alternatively, you can send to a small number of trusted contacts, but be transparent that they do not have it exclusively. Give them plenty of time – a few days – before the embargo lifts so they can go into the story in some depth.
- Make sure all contacts and spokespeople named in the media release are available for contact at that time.
- Does the media release relate to other news that's happening at the moment? You might tie it in with a certain day (World Obesity Day), political developments, etc. Avoid busy news days – for example, sending out at the weekend can be better than mid-week.
- Include contact details for spokespeople and make sure they are available when the release goes out.
- Include associated photographs, videos, reports etc as attachments.
- Send out via:
 - your university's media office
 - [medianet](#) (with a cost)
 - email to specific journalists (create your own media list of journalists who have previously written about this issue). Make sure you put the media release in the body of the email, not as an attachment.
 - link to the release via social media (Twitter is best). The release will need to be hosted on your website so you have a link to embed in the tweet.

For examples of media releases, visit your university's media pages or look at the [Prevention Centre](#).

How to engage with a journalist

Building relationships with journalists is generally the job of your university's media office. However, sometimes researchers will be contacted by a journalist directly.

- Many researchers build excellent relationships with journalists and are often approached for expert comment. Consider journalists as your stakeholders. Like any relationship, it takes time.
- If you want to propose an idea to a journalist, email or call them and make sure you put the most significant piece of information in the subject line. They receive hundreds of emails every day and you need to attract their attention.
- When making the pitch for your idea, highlight why the story is relevant for this outlet's readers.
- You can offer additional resources, such as background information, facts and statistics, publications, etc.
- Make sure you have statistics, case studies, images/video/soundbites easily to hand as they will want these.
- Make sure you contact them on the day the news story breaks. It will be old news by tomorrow.
- Be conscious of the journalist's deadlines and provide anything you have offered them as quickly as possible.

Interview tips

It can be nerve-wracking to do a media interview. Here are some tips.

- Always be polite and friendly.
- Make sure you know your facts – do your research beforehand. Some journalists may agree to give you their questions so you can prepare. They will almost always want to know What, Where, How, Who, Why and When.
- Write down your key messages – the crux of what you want them to convey.
- Stick to the key messages. If the journalist takes you off topic, you can still answer the question then revert back to your key messages. Phrases you could use include:
 - Just to put it in some context...
 - This is a complex issue...
 - To put this in perspective...
 - But let me make this point...
 - That's true, but what I'm concerned about...
 - That isn't my area of expertise, but what I can say is...
 - I'd also like to add...
 - What's critical to remember is...
- Try to anticipate difficult questions and how you will answer them.
- Ask whether the journalist will quote you, or whether they just want a background/. If they are quoting you, be careful what you say as you won't generally have the opportunity to approve what they write.
- There is no such thing as off the record. Only ever say something you would be happy to be attributed to you.
- If you are involved in broadcast recording – remember while the 'noddies' or 'two shots' are being filmed the mic could still be recording.

- Stop and think before you answer each question.
- Try to give closed answers – ones that don't require the question to make sense (especially in radio or TV). For example, if someone asks you 'What are the key drivers of obesity', don't just list them, but start the sentence with... 'They key drivers of obesity are...'
- Talk to the journalist as if they were an interested 16 year-old relative.
- Remember the journalist is the representative of their audience and is asking the question the audience will want to know.
- After the interview, make sure you're available for the journalist to contact you to check their story. You could follow up with an email thanking them for the interview and letting them know that you are available to check any facts.

Submit an opinion article

For tips on writing an opinion article, see chapter on content creation.

Outlets like the Conversation, Guardian, SMH/Age, etc are very competitive. They usually like you to pitch first.

- When making your pitch, focus on the 'so what' – the crux of what makes your opinion new and interesting.
- Provide the context for the opinion article – it is necessary for them to run it now because...
- Make sure you include your research credentials, but lower down in the email.
- Avoid all research jargon at any cost. The Conversation is pitched at a readership of age 16, the other outlets at a readership of about 12.
- Consider non-mainstream outlets, such as Croakey, the Mandarin, MJA Insight, PHAA – wherever your target audiences are likely to go for opinion.
- Check what the outlet has run on this subject before.
- For more information, see the [Guardian](#), [The Conversation](#), [SMH](#), [The Age](#), [ABC](#).

Use social media

- Make sure you are following the guidelines of your relevant institution/university's social media policy
- Try to tag/mention other key stakeholders to ensure wider engagement
- Use #hashtags that will help promote the post and ensure wider reach
- Use eye-catching imagery if possible or make sure the url link has a strong image
- Like/respond to engagement as appropriate but avoid engaging in unnecessary debate

For more support

Contact your institutional media office. They are the experts, and are available to provide advice. Many researchers find media training helpful.