



THE CANADIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

**WORKING WITH
THE MEDIA:
A GUIDE FOR
PSYCHOLOGISTS**

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Background

This document was prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by its Public Information and Communication Committee [Joseph M. Byrne (Chair), Juanita M. Mureika, and James H. Newton]. Portions of this document were reprinted and edited from an article authored by Joseph M. Byrne and published in *Psynopsis* (Summer 1993), and from materials generously provided by The Public Affairs Office, American Psychological Association. Special appreciation is extended to the Medical Research Council of Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their contributions to the funding for this project.

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Introduction

If the "Medium is the Message", then effective communication of scientific and professional information can only be achieved by thoroughly understanding the medium. Despite the years of rigorous training as scientists and professionals, most psychologists receive their first and only training with the media by the seat of their pants, with most of us seeking the services of a tailor immediately thereafter. Even with several interviews a distant memory, it is common to hear such phrases as, "I couldn't believe my 25-min interview was condensed to a 45-sec spot", "They highlighted only what the interviewer wanted", "I should have worded it differently, it sounds so different on radio", "I thought I was the only one to be interviewed, I would have prepared differently", and on and on. Today the amount of information available, the speed with which it is transmitted, and the geographic and demographic landscape over which it is received is staggering. The key to successfully disseminating scientific information depends initially on knowing what factors may interfere with telling your story, and what factors may facilitate telling your story.

Factors Interfering with Effective Communication

First, the general public, by and large, is not science literate. Only 5% of the general population can fully understand a science story, such as that contained in the pages of a national news magazine. In fact, even university science majors, at very reputable institutions, have been shown to have difficulty clearly defining DNA or distinguishing between Astrology and Astronomy.

Second, the public's retention of specific scientific information is relatively short. Only 2 weeks after the average science story has aired or has been in print, much of it has been forgotten.

Third, science can be intimidating for the average person. It may be viewed as fascinating, and useful, but probably `beyond' them.

Fourth, the general public has been shown to have a surprisingly strong belief in psychic phenomena. `Scientific fact' may not necessarily be the first choice among the information sound bites retained or believed.

Fifth, many science stories are presented in such a manner that the average person does not relate to them. The science story is seen as providing abstract information which does not have, nor will ever have, much impact on her/his life.

Sixth, there are many scientific disciplines, all competing for the same small, elusive audience.

So! Psychology is only one of the many scientific disciplines attempting to convey information to an audience that is very small, intimidated, suspicious, dabbles in psychic phenomena, and exhibits relatively poor retention of scientific information! This characterization might be enough to persuade the "Little Engine That Could" to look for a railway line in the plains of Saskatchewan! Not to worry. Although undeniably an uphill climb, a successful journey could be achieved with minimal strain if you followed five basic strategies.

Factors Facilitating Effective Communication

First, make the story new. The information should be adding something to the existing knowledge base. Whether it is a new perspective on a familiar topic, or the release of revolutionary findings, the public's interest is heightened when new material is presented or old material is presented in a new way.

Second, make the story interesting. Phrase your statements and answers in such a way as to make the audience want more. You need to "hook the audience from the very opening line; make it brief and direct. For example, Dr. Smith: "We now look at depression in a very different way." Interviewer: "Is that right, how have things changed, Dr.?"

Third, make the story relevant. The public must be able to relate to the topic. For example, the effects of reducing psychological stress on recovery from heart surgery, or personal management of the "daily blues" would be science stories of interest. Most people have known someone who has undergone heart surgery, and most have experienced "the blues". However, the story does not have to have such an obvious, direct application to daily life. It is up to you to make the story interesting, to make it relevant. For example, if you work with animals, talk about how understanding the sleep-wake cycles of the rat may eventually give us insight into how humans learn to adapt to chronic lengthening of wakeful periods. Reframe the scientific story in such a way as to make it relevant. Make the story such that the audience thinks it is worth its attention.

Fourth, make the story understandable. Most of us are so used to talking among our colleagues that we either talk in virtual "telegraphic speech", or we engage in scientific jargon. For example, "Well, the MANOVA was conducted with the view that the three cognitive underpinnings of this phenomenon were not orthogonal, and therefore, the degree of inter-correlations among these variables were taken into account...". The public will collectively reach for the off button in this scenario! Think about telling your story to a 7-year-old. It must be presented in a brief, clear, and jargon-free manner. Remember, when interviewed through a public medium, by and large you are not talking to your peers. Do not talk in an interview as if you were presenting a conference paper before 125 colleagues in your speciality area, who may be carefully searching for a flaw in your methodology or interpretation.

Fifth, make the story memorable. The time line of a science story is short, with limited recall of science facts after just 2 weeks of the story. Do not try to fit in the last 15 years and the next 5 years of your work in one interview! Stick to one or two key points and stay with them. There is no need to cite all the different viewpoints. Provide concise and memorable statements. If you can clearly convey one idea and it is retained by your audience beyond 2 weeks, you have made a command performance; move over Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep!

Achieving a Balance

You ultimately want to achieve a balance. You want to hook the audience, making it stand up and take notice. You need to provide interesting, but credible and accurate information, information that is sufficient in volume and depth that the audience learned something new, and is able to remember it. Each successful interview brings with it another request from the media to tell more about what you are doing, about what you know. Remember you do have something interesting to say and there are people who want to hear it. Psychology is among a select class of disciplines that already has the public ear and eye. Compared to Chemistry, Geology and Physics, the disciplines of Health, Medicine, Psychology and Sociology are rated by the public today as the most interesting topic areas, about which it wants to learn more.

The Media Interview

Background

There are three major types of media: Radio, Television, and Print. The basic strategies that would facilitate a successful interview in all three media will be reviewed. The three phases of an interview will be reviewed: Pre-Interview, Interview, and Post-Interview. Strategies which are specific to radio and television will also be reviewed. In the final section, strategies related to preparation of self-initiated submissions to the print media (Commentary, Letters to the Editor) will be presented.

Pre-Interview - General

Be Prepared. Give yourself time to consider the major points you want to make, and stick to them. For example, never agree to an immediate telephone interview. Ask what the time line is for the story or interview. Offer to check some facts, and to call back in a few minutes. If you cannot do the interview, say why (insufficient time, not your area of expertise) and, if possible, offer the name of a colleague knowledgeable of the topic.

Ask the reporter about the exact subject of the interview and the intended angle. Ask whether you alone will be interviewed. If others are interviewed, ask who they will be, what is the nature of their background (eg. psychologist, social worker, physician), and prepare accordingly. However, remember that interviews are designed to be spontaneous, and reporters usually will not let you know the questions in advance.

After gathering your thoughts, or checking with others in your organization, list the two or three most important points you want to make. Then call the interviewer back. Respect the deadline to which the reporter or interviewer must adhere.

ASK THE REPORTER:

- What is your name and telephone number?
- What is the name of your media organization?
- What is the story?
- What is the story deadline?
- Would a background fact sheet be helpful?

The Interview - General

Be Identified: Psychologists are often identified in news stories as John Smith, "Research Scientist" at Tech Institute, or Dr. Jane Jones "of the Psychiatry Department" of Provincial University. Clinicians are often referred to as "therapist". In each of these situations, the role of the psychologist has been obscured.

It is up to you to specify to the interviewer your title, affiliation, and special field of expertise.

To receive proper identification you can:

- State your preferred title ("Dr.", "Social Psychologist", "Clinical Psychologist").
- Preface one of your answers with 'As a psychologist, I have found that...'. Give your divisional, provincial, regional or national organization visibility. For example, if you are representing CPA, "I am a member of the Canadian Psychological Association Committee on _____ that is examining this issue. We are concerned that...".

Be Yourself: Relax and be natural. Do not think of yourself as speaking to a large audience. Focus on having a conversation with just one person, the interviewer.

Be Clear: Speak to the lay person. Use common everyday words. Avoid technical or scientific jargon.

Be Brief: Keep your remarks brief, clear, and to the point. Clear, concise answers make it harder for reporters to quote you out of context. Outline as you speak. For example, "What is most important about my study is...", or "We have benefited from these findings in these three ways. First, ..."

Be Honest: If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. Never compromise your credibility. For example, "That is an interesting question. However, we do not have the answer at present."

Be Personable: Use personal stories or anecdotes to highlight your comments. Appropriate use of humour also can help you relax and give you a self-assured and positive image.

Be Sincere: Do not be afraid to show your natural concern on an issue. However, do not confuse sincerity with an overly emotional position on the issue. You may appear biased.

Be Positive: Never repeat a negative. Interviewer: "Dr., why has your research failed to solve this problem?". Dr. Smith: "My research has not failed". In this exchange, Dr. Smith sounds defensive, and the audience will have heard on two occasions that his research has been associated with failure. Rephrase the question. For example, Dr. Smith: "My research has expanded our understanding of ..."

Be Confident: Relax, and remember that you know more about your subject than the interviewer. Use this self-assurance to help you stay on target with your goals.

Be Focussed: Make the interview issue-driven and not question-driven. A question-driven interview, by its very nature, gives the interviewer control. The questions likely will not always be worded in such a way that you can convey your message efficiently and to your satisfaction.

The Interview — Television and Radio

Once you have been called by a producer for a possible appearance, there are steps you can take to help ensure a successful booking and interview.

The Screening: This is your first contact with the show, so it is important that you be as prepared as possible. The pre-interview is usually conducted by a researcher, an associate producer, or producer. The point of the pre-interview is to determine whether you really are the person they wish to interview, and to explore possible angles on the study, depending on your answers to their questions.

Ask about the specific direction that the interview will take and about who will be interviewed with you. Offer to call the interviewer back after you have had a chance to gather your facts and to select the main points that you want to get across. Since producers work on tight deadlines, you should call back with your information the same day, preferably within a few hours.

The Booking: On the basis of your pre-interview, the producer decided that you were the best possible person for the interview. Tell the producer you prefer to be described as "Dr.", "clinical psychologist," "industrial psychologist," or other speciality. State your desire to be addressed by your preferred title.

The Interview: Be yourself and show your natural personality. Interject an appropriate level of emotion or passion into your voice to tell people you believe what you say. Try not to interrupt the interviewer. End your statements definitively so that the interviewer will know when to speak.

If you are on a panel with other experts (each one competing for airtime), do not wait until a question is directed to you before you respond. You were invited on the program because of your experience. You should participate and raise important points or clarify ones just made by another panellist, when appropriate.

The Interview - Television

Ask that your highest academic degree be included when your name appears on the screen. It is a good idea to double check with the producer once you have arrived at the studio to find out how you will be identified on the screen. Mistakes are made often.

- Use natural hand gestures and facial expressions to highlight your points.
- Maintain good eye contact with the interviewer.
- Do not look directly into the camera.
- Stay alert physically, even when you are not talking. The camera may still be on you.
- Do not watch the monitor. There is usually a time delay between the picture and your voice. This asynchrony will become very distracting. You may lose your trend of thought.
- Ignore cameras and people moving in the studio.
- Lean forward slightly in your chair. Do not swivel about.
- Rest hands naturally in your lap.
- Assume that your microphone is always "live", even during cut-aways to commercials.

Clothing: You should avoid white, deep reds, bold prints, stripes and dots, or colours that are too light or too dark. These will take the attention away from you and what you are saying. Conservative, well-tailored clothes are always a definite plus.

Accessories: Large jewellery is distracting and should not be worn. Likewise, cuff links or tie clasps can often glare and create distortions on the screen. Other items to avoid include hats, which cause harsh shadows, and self-darkening glasses, which darken under TV lights and give the appearance that you are hiding from public view.

Make up: A make up artist may or may not be provided for you.

Women: Wear normal daytime make up. If you use make up, use conservative eye and lip colours with a good base. Avoid blue, lavender and green eyeshadows or lipstick containing blue, which causes make up to disappear on the air.

Men: Consider a light application of corn silk or translucent powder to hide five o'clock shadow, or to reduce shine from forehead or receding hairline. Be sure that socks cover the calf and that the bottoms of shoes are free of holes.

The Interview - Radio

The audience is relying on only one sense; what you say and how you say it becomes even more important.

Live phone interviews

- Turn off your radio to prevent feedback.
- Keep the telephone receiver 1" from your mouth for all answers. Changes in volume may be interpreted as defensive or aggressive.
- Sit in an upright position. This allows better control of your voice and prevents you from becoming 'too comfortable'.
- Keep all notes on small index cards; do not shuffle them loudly.
- Avoid using "uh" sounds. It is better to take a slightly longer pause before answering the question.

Sample Interview

You have been contacted by a TV station. There is a fast breaking story regarding a parent accused of killing her children. The station has received many calls from distraught parents who se children have asked, "Mommy (Daddy), would you do that to me?" The station wants a psychologist to "reassure" the public. The clip is only 2-3 minutes long. It is to be added to the end of the news story.

First, you need to agree to an interview quickly. The story is fast breaking and going to be broadcast within 2 hours.

Second, the 'interview' will be very brief. You are being asked to 'reassure' parents and children because of the sensitive nature of this story. You will not have a lot of time to convey your message. You will need to be very brief, but informative. Make the message short, powerful, and memorable. (Bold means word should be stressed.)

Interviewer: "Dr. Smith, you just saw the story about the mother who is accused of killing her young children. This is a very disturbing story. We have received many calls from parents. Their children are upset, many of whom are asking, 'Mommy, would you do that to me?' Dr. Smith, what would you tell parents faced with this very difficult question?"

Dr. Smith: "Yes, this is a very sad story. It is very understandable how parents and children alike would be bothered by this tragedy."

"There are **THREE** things you can do: Listen, Reassure, and Make Distinctions. (PAUSE) Let's go through each one:

LISTEN — Children may have very different facts about the story. Ask your child what she/he knows about the story. This gives a parent a starting point for discussion.

Find out what particular aspect of the story the child finds frightening. Children may develop very different fears from the **SAME** story. This is especially the case for younger versus older children. Remember, "**children see the world from a child's eyes**".

REASSURE — **DO NOT** say things like, "Oh, now don't you worry your little self about that! Mommy would never let anything happen to you". You are telling your child that her/his feelings are not important, that they don't count! Your child has a fear, a real fear.

Tell your child that it is OK to feel frightened or sad. Tell your child how **YOU** feel, "Yes, I cried too when I saw that on TV! It made me very very sad". Adults have instant credibility. Telling how **YOU** feel could make all the difference in the world.

MAKE DISTINCTIONS — Remind your child that the mommy in the story is **VERY** different from mommy or daddy. To the younger child you might say, "That was a **REALLY MEAN** thing to do. I am glad they put that person in jail. They won't hurt anyone else". To the older child you might say, "That person is very sick. She must not have known what she was doing. She needs lots of help from the doctor so that can never happen again."

You might also take out the family photo album. Look at pictures of your family having fun times, such as during holidays and picnics. Pictures add to your reassuring words.

Interviewer: "Dr. Smith that is very helpful. This story, of course, brings up the old issue of TV violence. Are there any suggestions you can give parents to reduce the chance their kids might imitate the violence on TV or the chance their kids might be harmed by it?"

Dr. Smith: "That is a good question. Parents can do **FOUR** things: First, **AVOID** viewing news coverage when children are present; Second, **LIMIT** viewing of violent shows; Third, **BAN** very violent shows; and Fourth, **WATCH** TV with your children answer questions, ask questions see if your child understands what happened, and make distinctions between what is real and what is fantasy. The difference is not always clear to children.

Interviewer: "Doctor, one final question. Should children watch the news? Is there an age when it is OK?"

Dr. Smith: "Children differ in what they understand and in what bothers them. But as a general rule, there is no need to have children younger than 10-12 years old watching disturbing TV news coverage."

Interviewer: "Thank you Doctor, this has been very helpful."

Dr. Smith: "You are most welcome."

You might consider making a small index card to assist you in remembering your key points during the interview, such as the following:

- Listen - Facts/Feelings
- Reassure - Own Feelings
- Make Distinctions - Your home vs Others
- General - Avoid news with kids
- Limit viewing of violent shows
- Ban very violent shows
- Watch TV with kids

The Interview - Print

Most print interviews will be conducted over the phone or during an impromptu meeting following a presentation. If the story has a longer time to print, review the points in "The Basics", regarding interview preparation.

The Questions: Most journalists will not provide questions in advance, since this practice detracts from spontaneity and can turn what was supposed to be an interview into a speech on your part. But lacking the questions beforehand should not deter you from agreeing to an interview. For example, you should ask in advance about the specific line of questioning and the ultimate direction or angle the interview will take. It is permissible to ask for extra time to compose an answer to a difficult question, provided you call the reporter back promptly. You may also recommend a colleague whom you feel can better respond on the issue.

If you have an afterthought, do not hesitate to contact the reporter. Good journalists are interested in all the facts. However, do not follow-up with a call unless your information is truly important.

Editing Power: As a source you are rarely given the opportunity to read a story before it appears in print. It is even more rare to be given the opportunity for editing. Offering to read a story, or to have portions or quotes read back to you as a check for accuracy is helpful, but should be reserved for exceptional cases such as where the reporter is dealing with highly complex information. Remember, a demand to do so accomplishes little.

In lieu of "editing" power, there are precautions you can take. Before the interview, determine if there are any controversial or easily misinterpreted aspects of the topic. Roughly frame your answers in these areas beforehand. During the interview, emphasize to the reporter how important such points are. Assert the fact that your information may be inaccurate if stated another way.

Shaping the Interview: Selecting your main points in advance and sticking to them is a key to any successful interview. But the competent journalist, particularly the experienced science and health writer, also has an agenda to complete during your meeting. Aggressively trying to steer the reporter away from his or her main line of questioning can dampen the overall outcome of your interview. Whenever you can supply new facts, insightful information, and a fresh perspective, you are as much in control of the meeting as is necessary.

Post-Interview

It is totally appropriate to ask when the radio or television interview will be broadcast (if not live), or to ask when it may appear in print. The date given you may be just an estimate. Unless your interview is tied to a breaking news event or a scheduled investigative report, it is often used as a "filler". Your interview can be bumped to allow the presentation of a more pressing breaking news story, as judged by the news manager. It is reasonable to ask for a copy of the print story. In some cases, radio and television may provide a copy of your interview. You could offer to supply a blank audio or video cassette. However, given the logistics and staff time required, it is probably best to reserve such a request for exceptional radio or TV interviews (investigative report or scientific documentary).

As a follow-up to your interview, you may want to communicate with the reporter or producer. If you liked the article or segment, send a note with your appreciation and willingness to be contacted on similar stories. If you did not like it, do not overreact. Keep in mind that a story for the general public cannot be as comprehensive or detailed as a journal article. Most stories will not adversely affect either your integrity or that of the organization you are representing. You will have other interviews. Simply send a note to the reporter expressing your concern. Letters of concern are most effective and best received if they are polite.

Only in cases where there has been a **significant** misrepresentation of your views, call the reporter and politely note the error and ask for an immediate correction. Telephone the

editor if you do not get a satisfactory answer, and follow-up with a letter. But reserve this response for **serious** misrepresentations only. If after several interviews you have concerns about the reporting style and accuracy of a particular reporter, you should notify the editor and indicate that you will be available for interviews but not by that particular reporter, and note the reasons for this decision. The media needs feedback as well.

Remember, *THE MEDIA IS YOUR VEHICLE TO THE PUBLIC. TREAT IT WITH RESPECT.*

Submitting a Commentary or Letter

Commentary: You may have occasion to initiate a story. You may think that the public would benefit from a psychological perspective on a particular topic. For example, you may wish to write a commentary on a new diagnostic tool or treatment that has received popular media attention, or you may wish to revisit an 'old topic', the resolution of which has not been achieved. The most common venue for such a commentary would be newsprint. News magazines typically do not invite lengthy commentary, except for letters to the editor. Often newspapers have columns such as *Voice of the People*, *Opinion*, or more generally, *Letters To The Editor*. The space allotted for a commentary will vary according to the editorial policy of the newspaper, the importance of the topic, and frankly, the perceived importance of the author. However, commentaries are generally in the range of 750-900 words maximum. Longer commentaries than this will typically necessitate editing by senior editorial staff, about which you will have no input. Keep it brief, focused, and balanced. You want to be seen as an honest broker, one who is trying to assist the public in appreciating all the facts of an issue. You may give the commentary a brief, attention-grabbing title, but do not be surprised to see the editorial staff provide a title they think more appropriately fits the article and the audience for which it is intended.

Send a fax of your commentary. If available, note on the covering memo that you would provide the commentary on computer disk. This reduces time and cost for the newspaper, and increases the likelihood that the commentary will be published as you wrote it, through reduced transcription errors. The editorial office will contact you if your article is thought to be of interest to the public. By submitting your commentary you do not guarantee publication. The time of publication will depend on the time line of the commentary. It will be published sooner if the topic is very current, hotly debated, sufficient space is available. Sometimes several weeks may pass, as the paper has already committed the space to other commentaries on different topics.

Letter: Letters to the editor are often published more quickly than a commentary, as the space requirements are not as demanding. The typical length of the letter is 100-300 words. However, the length is influenced by the same factors noted previously. Usually letters to the editor are in response to a more recently published topic, but not necessarily. Since no title is allotted, it is important to briefly note in the introductory sentence to

what topic the letter is referring (e.g. "I would like to reply to the editorial of (date of article)").

Ethical Responsibility

During interactions with the media, psychologists' behaviour should be consistent with the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (CPA, 1991), and the *Practice Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services* (CPA, 1989).

In particular, when you are discussing a topic you should be very careful not to comment about a particular case in the media. This seems quite straightforward, but it can easily happen. For example, you have been contacted to discuss clinical depression. The impetus for the interview relates to a recent report of a person who, charged with a criminal offence, is contending that clinical depression was the reason for the erratic behaviour. It is acceptable for you to talk in generalities about the influence clinical depression may have on behaviour. **It is not appropriate for you to discuss clinical depression as it relates specifically to the behaviour of a particular individual.** You may be encouraged by the reporter to make such specific comments. To assist the public, the reporter is trying to make a clear link between your interview and the recent story about the person charged.

Be alert! Remember, you have neither interviewed nor treated this individual, and you have not obtained permission to discuss the matter. Therefore, you can only talk, in general terms, about what is known about the influence of clinical depression on behaviour. If you are being pressured by a reporter, you may need to tactfully use such phrases as "Although I cannot comment directly on this case, what we do know is ..."

Appendix

Responding to the Media

The Basics

- Return media calls
- Respect Media Deadlines
- Use fact sheets
- Never lose temper
- Never say "No comment"
- Never speak "Off the record"
- Never use jargon
- Be accessible
- Be prepared
- Be factual
- Be calm
- Be honest
- Be brief
- Be sincere

Other Resources

Strategic Communications for Non Profit Dealing With The Media
Medical Research Council of Canada,
Ottawa, Ontario
R1A OW9

How to Meet the Press:
Arch Lustberg on Effective Communication Techniques
National Association of Private
Psychiatric Hospitals
1319 F Street, N.W., Suite 1000, Washington, D.C. 20004
1-202-939-6700

How to Obtain Publicity on Mental Health in Health Care Reform:
A Guide for State Psychological Associations
How to Work with the Media:
Interview Preparation for the Psychologist Public Relations and Communications

American Psychological Association,
750 First Street, N.E.,
Washington, D.C.
20002-4242
1-202-336-5500

Benton Foundation and The Centre for Strategic Communications
1710 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W.
Fourth Floor,
Washington, D.C. 20036

