

Sound Science Initiative: Media Orientation Manual

Who Are the Media - and How Do They Work?

Scientists often ask the same questions about the media as the media ask of scientists: Who are they - and how do they work? What makes them tick, and what do they do when they start ticking?

The “media” are many different institutions with just as many missions. Television producers have different jobs and agendas from newspaper reporters or radio talk show hosts.

But all members of the media are, first and foremost, people - and they're easier to understand and work with when you approach each one as an individual professional doing a job.

In general, reporters are paid to report news to the public. They are looking for stories and angles that have not been told before, and they are looking for people (sources) who can help them tell those stories.

Working with reporters is about building a relationship. The relationship between reporters and sources is like any relationship - it is built on mutual respect, mutual understanding, trust, and common interests. To develop that relationship, you must understand how reporters work, what they need from you, and how you can help them.

Science Issues Present Complex Challenges

The linking of a reporter in search of news with the many stories emanating from science and environmental issues seems to promise benefits for all sides. But generating a news story is not always easy for an environmental science reporter.

One problem is the genuine difficulty that reporters have in covering science and environmental issues. Science reporters are generally not scientists, and their beat is so broad that it is often difficult for them to learn a subject well enough to confidently tell good science from bad - and, sometimes, good sources from bad. They may not have enough time to become experts on all the issues they cover. A newspaper science reporter may be writing about climate change one day and the HIV virus the next. According to a report from a Freedom Forum Environmental Journalism Summit, “the beat puts reporters at odds with scientists who mine arcane detail, public-interest groups that push political agendas, and businesses that push economic ones.”

Complicating the picture is the fact that journalists are trained to be “balanced” in their coverage. But achieving balance is often more difficult for reporters covering science than it is for those who cover, say, politics. In politics, news sources express their own opinions or values, none of which have more authority than those of any other individuals. In the field of science, however, some views are more valid than others because they represent the scientific community’s consensus on what is known about nature. This can sometimes put “balance” at odds with another important journalistic goal: accuracy.

Trying to balance their reporting, science and environmental journalists feel obliged to provide equal weight to opposing points of view. Most are sincerely struggling with the challenge of how to accurately describe a scientific debate and give the correct weight to different scientific opinions.

Another factor that complicates science issues for reporters is the nature of science itself and the ways that scientists reach a consensus on complex issues. The accumulation of scientific understanding is a slow and deliberate process, and often scientists are forced to rely on interim results or computer programs that model natural systems rather than on definitive results from a controlled experiment.

Some scientific findings evolve over time - and sometimes the new information seems to contradict the old. This is particularly true of environmental science. The human race is conducting a series of experiments on the planet's natural systems, and scientists are racing to understand the implications even as humans continue to tinker with the variables. Given this uncertainty, many scientists are reluctant to make the kind of unequivocal statements demanded by the media - the "sound bite" or "quick quote" - or they are uncomfortable drawing conclusions about policy from their data. Without the time or training to appreciate the subtleties of the debate, or to closely track the dialogue among the scientists themselves, reporters can end up feeling confused and misled.

Adding to the complexities of the issues and the nuances of scientific debate is that editors and producers often want to know what the local impact of a story is. It is frequently difficult or time-consuming for reporters to detail the specific impacts of global environmental issues, such as ozone depletion, on a city with a population of 20,000. As relevant and interesting as the story may be, if it has no immediate "local angle," it may be shelved in favor of more pressing local news.

Contrary News Is Sometimes Big News

The nature of the news business is that old news is no news. After years of reporting on the increasing scientific consensus on the dangers of climate change, some reporters and news organizations now view the consensus as old news. Any contrary opinions are thus likely to attract more attention than yet another story on the consensus. Aggressively questioning environmental science thus becomes the story itself.

In an article about "environmental reporting in an age of backlash," the *Columbia Journalism Review* reported that coverage of environmental issues is now far more skeptical than it was five years ago. On Earth Day 1995, the article said, "Upbeat articles in the *Economist* and the *New Yorker* took pokes at environmentalists, as the *Economist* put it, whose "efforts to scare the world over global warming seem not to have worked....It is becoming trendy to ask whether environmental laws, not polluters, are the real public enemy."

The Skeptics Strike Back

Inserted into this already complicated media arena are several well-funded, well-orchestrated campaigns to confuse the public about environmental science in order to stop or weaken policies designed to improve the environment. For example, the Western Fuels Association, an organization of coal producers and purchasers, foots the bill for publishing the *World Climate Report*, which is mailed to state and federal legislators and the media. Its editor, Patrick Michaels, is one of the most vocal of the small minority of climate change skeptics. Large electric utilities have also paid for Dr. Michael's travel to visit editorial boards of newspapers and speak to state legislators.

Another example is the "wise use" movement, comprised of a number of different groups fighting environmental statutes that restrict the use of wetlands, forests, or other natural resources. Although these groups seem to have spontaneously erupted from the grassroots, many are in fact supported and encouraged by national direct-mail experts with close ties to mining, forestry, and ranching interests, according to Daniel Barry, who tracks this movement for the Environmental Working Group.

The *Columbia Journalism Review* states that "such [wise use] organizations in the East are most likely to be financed by land developers and industry trade groups, and they sometimes adopt green-sounding names such as the National Wetlands Coalition. That one is made up mainly of oil drillers, developers, and natural gas companies that want federal wetlands policy rewritten to favor their industries. In the West," the *Review* continues, "most support tends to come from mining, timber, and

cattle interests seeking to protect their low-cost use of public lands, and the groups are usually fairly open about those goals.”

Groups that oppose environmental protection have been extremely adept at pushing the media's “balance buttons.” As the *Columbia Journalism Review* points out, “increasingly, news events and news organizations are likely to be targets of anti-environmentalist manipulation.” Unfortunately, whether or not their arguments have scientific merit, by entering the debate these organizations capitalize on the media's desire to try to provide balanced coverage - and, in a dangerous development, they seem to have succeeded in altering the media climate. Their agenda seems to be to create a cacophony on scientific issues to undermine the ability of either reporters or the public to distinguish credible from junk science. By reducing every issue to a scientific free-for-all, they foment public distrust of scientists and rely on the resulting confusion as their rationale for advocating inaction.

Why Reporters Need You

Reporters must explain issues simply and clearly so that the average reader, viewer, or listener can understand them. When they are working on a story, their editors or producers will ask, “Why is this story news?” Their audiences will ask, “Why does this story matter to me?” Often, particularly with science stories, reporters need help answering those questions: They often don't have much time to pursue those answers completely. They may be struggling to understand the issues they are writing about. They may have a personal bias about a particular issue. They also may not have been able to check into the background of sources from organizations with environmentally responsible names who have been calling to discuss an environmental science story. So, on any given day that a reporter is writing an important science story, he or she may be squeezed by an approaching deadline, confused by conflicting views on the story, pushed by an editor who thinks the story doesn't amount to a hill of beans• and possibly very impressed by the person from that benign-sounding, but industry-funded, coalition who called earlier in the day.

In addition, as in any profession, some journalists don't try very hard. For one reason or another, some reporters simply do a poor job.

All of these situations explain the need for reporters to have reliable, responsible, timely, and accurate sources of information. They need sources with unquestionable credentials and affiliations with respected organizations or universities that will lend credibility and authority to their stories. Local sources with those credentials are even more important to a reporter.

There are some sources reporters *must* talk to; very little that a president or governor does can be ignored. Other sources have enhanced status, special access, or a celebrity personality. Then there are the rest of us, who have to work much harder to get the media's attention.

The reporters who cover your issues may not realize how useful you can be to their work. They often don't have the time to pursue you. You must start to build relationships with them that will be beneficial to both of you - and to the public. That relationship won't be cemented in a day or week; you need to build it over time.

Of the four issue areas, biodiversity, climate change, ozone depletion, and population, pick one to be the focus of your media outreach. Although you may certainly want to write an occasional letter to the editor on another issue, it will be much more effective to limit your ongoing cultivation of a reporter to the issue in which you have the most expertise. Given the enormous overlap between climate change and ozone depletion, you may feel able to take these two issues on as a set.

Tips on Monitoring the Media

Just as the media feel an obligation to question and scrutinize the work of scientists, scientists have an obligation to monitor the media's work. Scientists must insist on accurate depictions of the scientific consensus and the relative validity of minority views. You can monitor the media to understand how the press formulates stories, to determine which stories are currently "news," to determine what sources reporters are relying upon, and to spot inaccuracies that may need correcting.

The first step in monitoring the media is to get to know your local television, radio, and newspaper outlets. Although reading the *New York Times* or listening to National Public Radio will give you a good sense of how the national media are covering an issue, it is on the local level that you can have the greatest impact. The basic principles of monitoring the media can be applied to television and radio, but your local newspaper may provide the best opportunity to learn how to monitor the press.

Who Is the Reporter?

- **Who - look for bylines.** Start keeping track of who reports on science and environmental news. The name of the reporter (the "byline") appears below the headline of the story. If the reporter works directly for the newspaper, his or her name will stand alone. Other bylines may read from news services such as Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), Reuters, Scripps Howard News Service, Knight-Ridder Washington Bureau, Gannett News Service, or Newhouse News Service, and may include the name of the reporter. These indicate that the paper relied on one of these news services for the article, which will be particularly likely for national and international stories such as climate change negotiations, or stories coming from Washington, D.C.
- **Where and when - look for datelines.** Each news story should begin with a "dateline" that lists where and when the story originated; no date implies the date of that edition. If a location is not listed, it was written locally.

Keep a record of bylines and datelines of stories regarding science and environmental issues, noting the news service or the name of the reporter. Pay particular attention to the local reporters, and note what other kinds of stories they cover. Does the same reporter who writes about mass transit review new car models? Are all science stories covered by one reporter? Is there a difference in slant or angle in stories by different reporters?

Where Does the Story Appear?

Public opinion is most influenced by the front news pages and the editorial pages. Editors use the placement and size of a story to signal its importance. A front page story on genetic engineering will be more widely read than a story buried between grocery ads for tomatoes.

The content of a story could also vary depending on where it appears. For example, the business section may include a story about the local electric company that focuses on how a new coal plant will boost profits. If the environment is mentioned, it is likely to be in the context of whether regulations will hurt the profitability of the coal plant. The same story covered by the general news desk might include a look at the plant's impact on the environment and on residents of surrounding neighborhoods.

What's On the Editorial Page?

Every newspaper's editorial page has its own personality. What is an issue of primary importance to one may not be of any interest to another. One newspaper may be greatly concerned about a national policy issue, but another may care only about the issue's local impacts. Two newspapers that agree on the importance of an issue may take totally different positions.

Keep track of the issues receiving attention on the editorial page - in editorials, columns, op-ed pieces, editorial cartoons, and letters to the editor.

- **Editorials.** Editorials are the opinions of the newspaper. In monitoring editorials, how would you describe their overall philosophy? Are there inconsistencies in their arguments? What kinds of arguments do they seem to favor? Is there a way to present environmental issues in the context of these arguments? Is the paper ignoring some issues entirely? Sometimes papers reprint editorials from other papers. Keep a record of the issues and sources of nonlocal editorials. Perhaps the local editorial staff never weighs in on a particular issue, but relies on other newspapers owned by the same company.
- **Columns.** Editorial pages frequently feature articles written by regular columnists, who can be staff writers, "guest columnists," or syndicated columnists. Monitor the columnists, topics, and points of view. Is there a regular schedule for the columns? Are they primarily written by local or syndicated columnists? Do the columnists write about local or national issues, or both? Does the paper feature columnists who take the same positions?
- **Op-ed pieces.** Op-ed pieces are longer opinion pieces that may appear on the same page as editorials, letters to the editor, and columns; in larger newspapers, they appear on a separate page. Keep track of their authors and issues. Are the writers local or national people? Do they write about local or national issues? Is the paper publishing op-ed pieces with differing points of view, or pieces that present just one side of a debate?
- **Letters to the editor.** Letters to the editor also appear on the editorial page. Keep track of who is writing them. Is the paper publishing letters with different points of view? Is it publishing letters from the same people on a regular basis?

Once you've become acquainted with the editorial pages, look back at the reporting in the news section to determine if the paper's editorial position on an issue appears to shape its news coverage.

Who Are the Sources?

How stories originate and who is quoted are two important factors in determining how balanced a news story is. Scanning the various stories within a newspaper will show you whether government and corporate sources predominate. Check to see if the reporter quoted someone who disagreed with the government officials or business spokespersons. Assess who is setting the agenda, who the newspaper treats as credible, and if the newspaper has marginalized or altogether ignored people representing one point of view.

Does the reporter indicate the relative standing or credibility of the different sources quoted in the story? Does the reporter give the same amount of scrutiny and skepticism to all sources, or just some? Is there an effort to present a range of opinions, or just the extremes for and against?

Pay attention to the description of sources. Is there any indication of the credentials of “experts” quoted in stories, or whether those experts might have hidden interests or agendas? Does the story tell who funded a particular study?

Getting Started

Keep track of your monitoring of reporters, stories, and editorial pages, and of your observations about newspapers’ coverage of science and environmental issues. You may, for example, be able to show that the newspaper has run numerous news articles or editorials presenting only one side of the global warming debate, or that it has not published any stories about several important developments on population policy that have been announced in the past six months.

You will soon receive the first of the four briefing packages on biodiversity, climate change, ozone depletion, and population. We will include some specific tips on how to monitor the coverage of each issue.

We would like to review the coverage in your paper. Please send us articles and editorials from your paper on the issue you’ve selected. Only send us the articles written by a local reporter, because UCS staff will track stories written by the Associated Press and other news services. It would be very helpful for you to send us a quick e-mail to let us know that your paper carried the *New York Times* story on the Endangered Species Act or a Reuters article on ozone depletion. We are also interested to know which national columnists appear regularly in your paper.

Tips on Building Relationships with the Media

As a rule, reporters like to keep themselves apart from the issues, and they work very hard not to take sides in policy debates. However, scientists and science journalists do share a common interest in fostering public understanding of science. The two groups also share the need to continually verify and confirm. These common interests can form the basis for building a relationship with a reporter who faces the challenge of communicating complicated science questions to his or her readers.

Perhaps you have been frustrated by a recent science or environment story that you thought was inaccurate. It is in the public interest for you to point out the error, so that it may be corrected in future stories on the issue. The reporter is likely to welcome your help, as most reporters pride themselves on accuracy.

Perhaps you know that the next report on climate change from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change will include important new findings. That story also presents an opportunity to work with a reporter. You can give the reporter a valuable tip on an upcoming story, and also be able to introduce the story to the reporter with your interpretation of its importance.

Whether you are infuriated by a news report you think is inaccurate or biased, or are excited about publicizing the findings of some recent research, you can participate in the reporting of environmental science.

How to Be a Good Source

An environmental reporter from the *Washington Post* once gave this advice to her potential sources: “Speak English and be honest.” As important as that advice is, being a good source isn’t quite that simple. You can be both a *proactive* and *reactive* source of information. Proactive media work encourages or discourages coverage of issues, as well as provides context for a future story (known as framing an issue). Reactive media work responds to breaking news or an already published article. In

becoming a source, remember that reporters are people who are looking for factual, interesting, and fresh information from sources who are professional and pleasant. Be aware that all your conversations with reporters are “on the record” and can be quoted unless you and the reporter explicitly agree otherwise.

As a good source, you should:

- Introduce yourself, and state your professional affiliation.
- *Briefly* state why you are calling.
- Always ask if a reporter is available to talk briefly (not on deadline) or if there is a better time for you to call back.
- Call a reporter only when you have heard of an upcoming story that he or she may be interested in, or when you have a news story - never call just to talk.
- Promise only what can be done, and do it when promised.
- Return phone calls from reporters promptly.
- Answer only the questions you are able to answer, and offer to get back to the reporter with the answers to unanswered questions or with additional information.
- Be as accurate and honest as you can. That means not overselling a story and being honest with reporter about what you don't know. This is the best way to earn a reporter's trust.
- Avoid being unduly dismissive of opposing viewpoints. In fact, be ready to suggest (if asked) sources whose views differ from yours. The reporter will appreciate a tip on other perspectives. A good way to do this is in the context of “Here's their view and my response is....” Being willing to expose your views to scrutiny and help reporters bring in other perspectives will add to your credibility.

Ways to Reach the Media

When you are ready to start building relationships with reporters, there are many ways in which you can work to establish yourself as a reliable and accurate source of information. As a scientist, you are in a better position than many to have a positive and credible influence on the media and their audiences.

- **Send a note.** You can start a relationship with a reporter by dropping a one-sentence note after a particularly good story, or perhaps write a very brief letter (less than a page) after an article that you believe it was incomplete or inaccurate. Your goal is to make sure that the reporter has all the facts. Be objective, reasonable, and brief. Never attack a reporter personally or say anything to alienate him or her.
- **Call a reporter.** Eventually, you may want to call a reporter to introduce yourself. Briefly state what you want to talk about: a recent article, for example, or the reporter's or newspaper's coverage of a particular environmental science issue. You may be commenting on a scientific development or news

story that is breaking that day. You may want to raise concerns that certain issues have not been covered enough, or that important angles on an issue have been neglected.

A polite note or call to a reporter should definitely be your opening move. You may lose the chance to ever cultivate a reporter if you *begin the dialogue* by going over his or her head to the editor. It will be particularly difficult for a reporter to put aside public criticism in a published letter to the editor. If instead you privately alert a reporter to an error, he or she is likely to appreciate your tact and consider you a resource to avoid future errors. If the reporter is unresponsive to several personal attempts, then it is time to contact the editor.

- **Write a letter to the editor.** Media research has found that the letters-to-the-editor section of the editorial page is one of the most widely read sections of a newspaper. Your letter is more likely to be published if you respond to something that has appeared in the paper.

The key to a good letter is to keep it brief - four short paragraphs or less - and make only one or two key points. Again, don't attack the newspaper or reporter; simply point out the errors or shortcomings of the story. Sign the letter from you as a scientist, and include information about your scientific, academic, or professional affiliation, as well as your address and phone number.

- **Meet with an editorial board or writer.** Editorial boards of newspapers are available and willing to meet with responsible people having something to say that is relevant to the community. The purposes of editorials are to recommend a plan of action, to call public attention to an issue or program, or to evaluate the actions of public officials or governments. If you would like to meet with an editorial board or an editorial writer, your message and the editorial support you request should be consistent with those purposes.

To approach an editorial board, write a letter requesting a meeting; the letter should briefly describe the issue you are concerned about and why the editorial board should know about the issue, or your point of view on it. Follow up on your letter with a phone call to see if the board, or an individual, is interested in meeting with you.

Prior to the meeting, collect material that will be concise, understandable, and useful background information for the editorial board - but don't overdo it. If possible, tie your presentation to something newsworthy - ideally a story that has been recently covered by the newspaper or one that the newspaper knows is approaching. Consider bringing with you other people from the community who support your point of view. Be prepared to cite as many local angles as possible.

Follow up the meeting not only with whatever additional information you promised to provide, but also with a thank-you note to the editorial board members you talked with.

- **Write an op-ed piece.** Once a relationship with a reporter and a newspaper has been established, your credibility and reliability will be established as well, and writing an op-ed piece may be an additional way for you to participate in your newspaper's environmental science coverage.
- **Try talk radio and talk-back opportunities.** Increasing numbers of people are receiving their news from talk radio. Unfortunately, people like Rush Limbaugh are spreading scientific misinformation across the national airwaves. Calling in to your local radio talk shows is a quick and effective way to counteract inaccurate claims.

In addition, many radio, television, and cable news programs provide listeners and viewers time for editorial responses or other talk-back opportunities. For example, your local nightly news or local access

cable program may have a weekly segment in which a citizen speaks out on a certain issue. Call your local television, radio, and cable stations to inquire about these opportunities.

If You Have a Story, Is It Newsworthy?

Of course you think your story is newsworthy. It is something in which you probably have a great professional and personal investment, and something of significant interest to your peers. But to use the media effectively, what you personally think is newsworthy isn't as important as what reporters think is newsworthy.

The best way to determine what stories reporters think are news is to watch, listen, and read your local news media. You'll develop a good sense of what interests them and what they think their audience cares about. In general, your story must be relevant to the reporter's audience. It should be timely: it should have immediate interest. It should be focused on a specific issue or angle. You should know its basics: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Before you call a reporter, think about what your story and message are:

- The rule at the Associated Press used to be that every story could be told in 25 words. What your story in brief?
- What is new about your story?
- What is your message - is it clear, concise, and relevant?
- How does the story matter to you and to the community?
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- How do you want the reporter to help you?
- Be sure of your facts, figures, names, and titles.

No matter how good your story is, be aware of a reporter's deadline, and give him or her ample time to talk with you, read your report, call other sources, plan a graphic, find a photo, and do anything else that will develop the story. A television reporter may have to send at least three people to film the story; if the crew needs to interview several people, they have to go from place to place, and then write and edit the story.

A reporter for an evening paper must finish a story by noon. A reporter for a morning paper must finish by 6 or 7 p.m. A television reporter (unless the story is breaking news) often cannot cover a story after 2 p.m.

Making a Difference

For those of us who believe that authoritative science should be the foundation of environmental policy, the press is a critical player. Until now, a handful of scientists have dominated in the media through syndicated columns, newsletters, and connections to conservative talk show hosts. Your

participation in the public discussion of these issues can make a pivotal contribution to the decisions we make as a society.

June 1995