

Using the media to deliver your message: the why and how

For many of us, the prospect of being interviewed by a reporter is quite daunting. As most journalists don't come from a scientific background and they are used to a very different style of communicating ideas, many of us fear our message will be taken out of context or otherwise misrepresented. For example, sometimes the conclusions generated from extensive empirical and systematic research can be portrayed as a psychologist's personal opinion. Some others worry that they can't do justice to all the complexities of their work in a very brief interview. For these reasons it's easy to just refuse the interview and carry on with your work. However there are many reasons why this response can be just as damaging.

Why?

Psychologists can be misrepresented to the public and many of the public don't fully understand what it is that we do. This is exactly why psychologists need to be proactive in their relations with the media. If we don't talk to the media about our research, our conclusions and our profession then others will continue to misrepresent us. We need to talk to the public. In addition, much research funding comes from public funds and so the public have a right to know what we are finding with their money. This will in turn attract future funding for our research area and future generations of psychologists.

It's not just the public that need to be informed about the value of psychology and the need to make psychological services accessible. Today, the media acts as an important driving force in creating public policy. Legislators, politicians and other professional decision makers are often informed about science and scientific advances through the media.

For these reasons, the Psychological Society of Ireland's primary objective is the advancement of psychology as a pure and applied science and so as members, we need to take this responsibility.

But there are also many personal benefits to using the media to communicate, such as promoting your book or practice, sharing your new findings and encouraging public interest and understanding of your work. Communicating with the media can build up your reputation as a knowledgeable psychologist and researcher and a good communicator. When done properly, the whole experience can be quite enjoyable, empowering and valuable.

How?

To help, the following are some tips and tricks so that you, the reported and the public get the most from the interview.

Know the purpose and the questions
Why have you been asked to do this? Who is doing the interview? Interviews often have an 'angle' and this is often linked to other current affairs or other news stories. If you're not comfortable

with the angle, the questions, the interviewer or the publication then don't be afraid to turn down the interview.

If possible, it is always helpful if you can get the questions beforehand so you can prepare your answers. If this isn't possible then try to anticipate the way the interview will go. What are the most basic issues in the subject matter; why are they important and how do they apply to everyday life?

If possible, chat with the interviewer beforehand to determine their knowledge on the topic and explain the area if they are not familiar with it. This will allow them to ask more knowledgeable questions and you'll be more confident that they understand your answers.

Know the answers

Prepare your overall message or points in advance and work towards communicating these. You should not only be familiar with the area and the answers to the questions but you need to make them clear, succinct and accessible. Keep your points short, speak in simple terms and avoid jargon.

At the same time remember the limits of your expertise or experience. Don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer, as speculation can be very harmful to you, members of the public and psychology in general. In situations when there doesn't seem to be an evidence-based answer simply deflect the question. This reinforces the importance of evidence to psychologists and their profession. In these situations it is often possible to answer a different question very well. For example, "although the research doesn't address this issue we *did* find that...".

It's also very important to speak in generalities. Often researchers are asked to comment on specific situations, events or individuals. Remember you can't know an individual's psychological state unless you're seeing them professionally in which case you'd be bound by confidentiality. But you can comment on relevant research in the area and how it applies to others in general. For example, you might be able to use a celebrity break-up to talk about the research on marriage problems but not about the celebrities.

Relax

Nerves can be the biggest problem with an interview. Gather your thoughts, get organised, speak clearly and slowly and make a conscious effort to relax your

The External Relations Panel (ERP)

ERP is a sub-committee within PSI set up to promote the image of the Society and of psychologists and to bring relevant psychological and PSI information to the attention of the media. The members of the ERP are: Ruth Mullally (Chairperson), Chris Lewis (Co-Secretary), Conor McGuckin (Co-Secretary), Louise Higgins (Ordinary Member), Brendan Rooney (Ordinary Member), and Pauline Cummins (Ordinary Member).

ERP Functions

- *PSI Conference press coverage*
- *Support and advise psychologists talking to the media*
- *Workshop on Media Training at Conference event*
- *Training Day for psychologists talking to the media*
- *National Careers Event for psychology undergraduates*
- *PSI Press Releases in response to ad hoc events*

Media Workshop at PSI Conference – “How Psychologists can Deal with the Media”

ERP are holding a media workshop on “Overcoming Fears When Talking to the Media” on Friday, 12 – 1 in Session E if you would like to find out more.

The key focus of this workshop is to familiarise psychologists with the workings of the media and provide practical advice on same.

The format of the workshop includes

- A presentation on ‘Dealing with the Media’
- Input from a psychologist with significant media experience
- An interactive Q & A session

body. It can sometimes help to bear in mind who the audience is. Perhaps think of a friend who doesn’t know anything about psychology and speak to them.

The above tips apply to all interviews in all media. However, different issues arise and vanish depending on the type of interview you do. The following are some media-specific tips.

Television

Before the interview

Start by gathering all the information about the interview. You can start by checking if you will be interviewed on location or in a studio. If you need to go to the studio, get there early, relax, get a coffee and start asking some questions! You should ask if the interview will be live or pre-recorded. If the interview is pre-recorded you should find out if it will be edited. It may also be possible to see it before it is aired.

If you find out the duration of the interview it will give you an idea of how much information you should prepare. You should also know if there will be another guest, what their background is and their position on the topic. Depending on who it is, you may have support for your argument or you may find you need to defend your points.

During the interview

Prepare a small number of main points instead of preparing many answers with too much information. Then communicate these points in the simplest way you can. This is so important that it doesn’t always matter

if you answer the question you were remember what you said, not what you wore.

Only look at the camera if being interviewed from a remote location. Otherwise engage with the interviewer, try to let the conversation flow and don’t patronise or lecture the interviewer. This makes a great interview! The flow of conversation can be disrupted if you keep looking down to your notes so don’t even bring any...you know the topic! Remember to relax and try not to move around too much.

Radio

Much of this applies to radio interviews too but this time nobody can see you. Although this means you can’t rely on gestures or facial expressions, you can wear what you want and be comfortable. You can also take some simple notes with you, but again, keep it simple.

If listeners will be calling in to ask you questions or make comments then you should bring a pen and paper with you. When someone calls you should take down their name and use it when you speak to them. You can also write down the main points or gist of their comment or question.

Press

The printed press most often has an ‘angle’ or an editorial point. As mentioned earlier, you should find this out before agreeing. If you’re not happy with the angle you can renegotiate or decline.

Although, journalists may not know very much about psychology, they know a lot about asking the right questions and getting answers. Sometimes journalists can collect their information in seemingly informal situations (e.g. down the phone) so it can be easy to be more forthcoming than you originally wanted.

An advantage of the printed media interview is that you can take all the time you need to answer a question, don’t feel pressured to answer on the spot. A very helpful way to prepare for a press interview is to ask for all the questions in advance and tell the reporter that you will call them back in ten or fifteen minutes. But remember journalists have many deadlines to meet so you must call them back when you say you will. There will always be further questions and points for clarification based on your responses but after your preparation these should be no problem.

If you want to provide information without being quoted, you can inform the journalist that “this is off the record”. You should inform them of this before you provide the information so the journalist can avoid making many unusable notes. It also allows any negotiations about the information to be completed before it is provided. As journalists rely heavily on their sources you can be very confident that the journalist will respect the “off-the-record” agreement.

The Perfect Interview

So the perfect interview comes from preparation. If you know the purpose of the interview, the context and the questions, then you can better prepare your message and your answers. This will help you relax and really enjoy the experience.

To Summarise:

- Know the purpose of the interview
- Know which main points you would like to communicate
- Speak in generalities
- Limited to speak on your own knowledge and expertise
- Think of questions beforehand
- Bear in mind your audience
- Speak clearly, slowly and concisely
- In essence, KISS – Keep It Short and Simple!