



'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Harriet Gross (Chair, Press Committee), on H.Gross@lboro.ac.uk.

Providing a strong base

ONE of the functions of the BPS is to promote public understanding of psychology. The main way to achieve this is through representation of psychologists and psychological ideas in the media. Here psychologists have a big advantage over many other disciplines, as they are often called upon by journalists to make comments on the psychological impact and significance of a wide range of events and topics. But how does this work and why do some psychologists' names crop up in the papers over and over again?

The public relations unit at the BPS (formerly the press office) has a list of those willing to speak to the media, and can match up enquiries on a particular topic with a known, trained and experienced expert in the field. The main criteria for joining this list is being a good communicator: the members on it have shown themselves to be capable of taking their expertise and knowledge and presenting it in an accessible and understandable way to journalists.

This is an excellent service. Most of the media comment the two of us make results from contacts made through this database. There seems to be no limit to the topics on which journalists seek comments. In our experience, this ranges from the serious (e.g. gender differences, work stress, effects of women's magazines on dieting, etc.) to the frankly absurd. For instance, during the height of *Pop Idol's* popularity, a journalist contacted our department at Leeds University to seek comment on trousers and personality – more specifically, did the height of Simon Cowell's waistband reveal anything insightful about his personality?

Providing comment to the media can certainly raise your profile as a psychologist, and on occasion this can lead to useful contacts (for example, from publishers or other researchers). It may also lead to other interesting if potentially embarrassing experiences. I [Fiona] was asked to comment on the value of flotation tanks for stressed employees. This led to an opportunity to try out the experience of flotation at the launch of a local flotation centre. To anyone else in this situation,



The BPS public relations unit

I recommend making sure that you have a towel before finding yourself wet and naked in a flotation tank at a public event.

As the above examples suggest, it can be surprising how journalists and other media employees interpret one's area of expertise: for the psychologist this can be unsettling. For instance, I [Chris] comment on memory. So last month, when a radio station picked up on the news that a man 'forgot' his wife was in the car for several hours whilst out shopping, they asked me to speak on the radio about women's memory being superior to men's. (I couldn't – it would be misleading to say that this kind of gross error is part of the normal pattern of gender differences.) In comparison, one journalist at *The Independent* was interested in how everybody seemed to have a 'memory' for the London bombings, even if they weren't involved. That was a nice opportunity to talk about how people use memory for such things in order to intersect their individual and social lives – one of the social functions of memory. What was more difficult was when he wanted me to support his view that people had false memories for knowing the bombers: how come nearly everyone in Leeds seemed to know these people?

My own first experience with the media was before I had attended the BPS media training course, and before I appeared on the database. I was commenting on a rare memory deficit called 'recollective confabulation' in which sufferers claim that everything in their life has already happened before. I was keen to talk about memory, but the interviewer seemed more

inclined to talk about this as a problem of consciousness. I have long since learnt not to be afraid of talking about consciousness, but at the time this made me very nervous. The journalist stopped recording and we discussed this. He did not want factual inaccuracies in his piece so was pleased that I had drawn attention to my reservations. I have never found a journalist who wants you to talk about things you know nothing about or forces you into talking about what they expect to hear. True, you may need to be assertive about what you will and won't talk about, or suggest a more suitable colleague for a particular topic, but it is very unlikely you will be misrepresented if you are open and honest about your expertise.

Chris Moulin and Fiona Jones

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