

Psychologists and the media – opportunities and challenges

We hear from psychologists and journalists, with practical tips based on their experiences



'One of us, somewhere, will spark the most unlikely interest'

Sophie Scott on the many benefits of popularising science

Are scientists who do a lot of public engagement work less good scientists? This seems to have been the view of the scientific community in the past – Carl Sagan was famously blackballed by the American Academy of Sciences, despite having a strong publication record, and this was widely believed to have its roots in his enthusiastic promotion of science in popular media.

Nowadays of course, we are all encouraged to engage in many kinds of public engagement activities, not least by funding bodies and universities. But it seems that the scientific community still views the scientists who appear in the wider media as less good scientists, according to a review by the Royal Society in 2008. Interestingly, the evidence is that academics with popular publications also had higher levels of academic publications (see, for example, Peter Bentley and Svein Kyvik's 2010 survey of academic staff and public communication). As bestselling science writer and neuroscientist Susana Martinez-Conde has pointed out, maybe productive writers are productive in all fields, and, as I teach my students, getting better at writing benefits all writing activities.

In fact, there is also evidence that the scientific community is OK with scientists doing public engagement work, as long as the science is sound, and the person is high profile (such that this is part of their job) and not proactive in contacting the media. In other words, it looks like we're OK with scientists getting involved with wider communication of science as long as they look like they don't really want to do this but are absolutely forced to. Heaven forbid that you might want to.

Obviously my view on this topic is wildly biased as I like science communication and public engagement work and I do as much of it as I feasibly can – from writing book reviews to public lectures, from Science Fairs to the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures. And I do this while maintaining a strong profile of academic research. I do it because I like it, it's extremely rewarding, because I get to introduce my

students and colleagues to the field, because it's made me better at writing and better at giving talks, and because it has expanded and enriched my scientific research. I can think of at least four different strands of my research that have been primarily driven by contacts made through public engagement activities – for example, my work on voice and voice production has all its roots in a public lecture I did with Duncan Wisbey, a professional impressionist.

The big change came for me in 2008 when social media made it possible to engage in a lot more self-promotion of both science and science communication – one could write a blog or make a short video on YouTube and promote it on Facebook and Twitter, and if that got picked up through the media, great, but you could still assess the impact within the social media networks. Social media is overall a mixed experience, but it's ideal for (the much loathed) self-promotion. And it can lead to many other opportunities – I was suggested for a TED talk at the main 2015 TED meeting by someone I only know through Twitter. And the TED talk was used by the Royal Institution as an audition reel for the BBC when they were suggesting me for last year's Christmas Lectures. (Have I mentioned that I did these? I feel like I should again, just in case anyone missed it.)

When I was a kid, watching Carl Sagan give his Christmas Lectures on the planets and the Voyager spacecraft was the first time I ever thought that I wanted to be a scientist – I was absolutely hooked. And for me, that's the bottom line for science communication – we should encourage everyone to do it, because you never know who you are going to engage (I'm sure Carl Sagan wasn't looking to inspire psychologists). The wider the variety of us getting involved, the greater the chance is that one of us, somewhere, will spark the most unlikely interest, maybe on someone who had no idea they wanted to know more about science. And all of science needs that.



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A fork in the road

Aleks Krotoski on being a broadcaster and psychologist

As I was finishing my PhD, my dad offered some words of advice. He was a multi-degreed lifelong research scientist who had tried to dissuade me from going into the same profession. As I'd ignored that, this was probably his last-ditch effort. 'Don't tell them about your media career,' he said. 'It will count against you.'

Now, I thought he was being overly critical, and perhaps a little touchy too. Still, I listened to the extent that I didn't broadcast that I'd worked in television

before returning to academia. This being the age of Google, it backfired occasionally when a colleague would, for whatever reason, search for my name. And when I was asked what I was doing after submitting my dissertation, I didn't hide that I was going off to interview many of the same people I referenced in my thesis for a BBC 2 documentary series, but I wasn't forthcoming with the information either. I still got the degree. But he was, in a way, right.

I am no longer in academia. Instead, I'm in media. Out loud I use the loose term 'journalist', but in my head I have lofty ideas that I'm involved in communicating important social psychological science. Really, I'm a journalist. The truth is that I'm more welcome in the journalism field – with its broad, sweeping generalisation and tight turnarounds – than I am in academia – which exists to unpick those generalisations at a much slower pace.

It's been a hard thing to admit to myself. The sticky tendrils of the academic identity that I'd reified during the intensive training of the higher degree didn't come unstuck for years after I'd finished, despite the fact that I was making my money outside the Ivory Tower. I was grateful to the institutions that incorporated me into their visiting programmes, but I knew they weren't interested in my analytic chops. My media profile gave good Impact. It was a transaction both ways.

I have now been outside academia for too long to return to a department. And just as my studies changed how I wrote for the general public, I'm too far gone the other way to write a research paper. But my university background does turn up as I write the stories we tell in BBC Radio 4's *The Digital Human*; my producers know that scripting sessions will last hours as I put them through viva-level enquiries about every narrative decision, every case study, and the lack of psychology theories in the story. But they also do a good job of keeping me comprehensible too.

I make my own programmes and podcasts about psychology, but find the self-directedness of the



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projects much more like solitary academic research. And that comes with the same hangups. Because I am trying to explicitly communicate science, I get too close to a theory or a study to actually make it digestible by Anyone Else. I have to pass it by disinterested people to lighten the tone before I push publish. Yes, knowing too much in the media is not always a good thing. They too are a little scornful of the other side.

Although my academic credentials do make me more interesting as a writer to editors, I honestly can't say that my journalism has made me more attractive as a researcher to academia. Although some are able to balance both worlds, for me there was a fork in the road. I took my dad's advice. I've kept them separate.

you, they know how to make you feel special; but once they get that information, that's it! You have to ask why you want to do it. For me it was about having that wider platform to talk about what I do and help the public have a better understanding of mental health issues and empower them to help themselves.

I don't think working with the media trivialises the subject. Psychology is not supposed to be behind closed doors at academic conferences, we should throw it open and invite people to understand it. Get out there and do it. Do the BPS media training (it's an eye-opener), and join the media database. Get a mentor, someone who has been through it. Don't just comment on anything. If you're going on live TV do some role-play beforehand, speak slowly and make sure you have three points you'd like to get across and stick to them... never waffle!

But remember that you'll never know everything. Don't feel like you need to. If you're appearing in the media as an expert remember the media are on your side when they call you – don't feel like they're out to stitch you up or make you look silly.

'You have to ask why you want to do it'

Funke Baffour on the importance of a wider platform

My very first 'live' experience was in 2006 when I went onto the *Chris Evans Show* on BBC Radio 2. I had signed up to the British Psychological Society media database, where I got most of my media work, and they got a call asking me to do some IQ analysis on his radio show. Then a few weeks later I was asked to do *Big Brother* with Dermot O'Leary, and that was my first experience being on live TV. I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed giving out information to so many people and it gave me a nice buzz.

There were a couple of situations where I was asked to do things which didn't quite fit in with my professional identity and how I wanted to be portrayed as a clinical psychologist. On one occasion a TV programme I was on said, 'OK, when the music comes on I want you to do a funky dance': I had to be quite clear in saying no; I know my name's Funke, and I like having fun, but I was there to give my expert views and represent my profession.

The media is a cut-throat business – you can be the flavour of the month when they want information from



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Three cautions

David Pilgrim on the compromises involved in media work

It is not self-evident that taking every opportunity to put Psychology (big P) into the public domain, via the mainstream mass media, is a good thing. Every solution about an old problem, in this case hiding the discipline's light under a bushel or in the Ivory Tower, brings new problems. Reflecting on why my heart sinks when I see it all going wrong, three points come to mind.

First, lay audiences like simplicity and the mass media (even the broadsheets and the serious parts of the BBC) pander to this by offering reductionist headlines. Medics have to suffer being asked about the cause of cancer and we have similar crosses to bear. Whether it is putative concepts like the male brain or the psychopath in your workplace, the journalist will want to know the main 'story' in headline form. Not only will they not be too interested in pre-empirical considerations and conceptual controversies or doubts from ambiguous data, they may not grasp them at all. Journalists have a job to get their facts right, but psychological findings and debates are not like reporting the details of a road traffic accident or opening a village fete... a partial story may well suffice, provided that it is entertaining.

As a discipline, psychology contains traditional positivists, postmodernists defying them and critical realists (like me) in between and attacking both sides for different reasons. My sense is that the first of these is the safest place to speak from, when journalists make an approach, and this will then create a narrow conservative, 'disinterested', empiricist image of the discipline. That impression will be comforting for many, but it leaves some of us feeling unrepresented. In the very first editorial of the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1904, Ward and Rivers set out the stall for positivism and psychology as a distinct empirical science, scorning and leaving behind philosophical

speculation. They set out the stall about 'the facts' produced now by this 'distinct science'. Over a century later, we have come a long way and the discipline remains both variegated and at times fragmented, but maybe the narrow 1904 version is what is most comfortable when working with the mass media.

My second wince point, in the wake of any such approach from journalists, is that the outcome invariably will be under their control, not the psychologist's. Talk to any colleague about their frustrations when trying to get complexity and contention over in good faith to journalists. Even when the psychological expert is drawn on, at length, in the background as a consultant or foregrounded as an interviewee, they will then look on as an edited product misses out caveats offered or even a major caution expressed.

My third concern is a wider ethical one about media psychologists tempted by celebrity status. The usual considerations about humility (being careful to only speak about your particular area of expertise) seem to get blown away, when the mass media discover a socially skilled and telegenic expert. This can lead to people who may have once only offered opinions about their research or form of professional practice, now being seduced into being expert about any and every matter psychological. A cultural pincer movement of celebrity-seeking and consumerism has amplified the risk of this seduction.

None of the above three cautions imply that we should avoid journalists like the plague. They do remind us, though, that any contact with them might lead to compromises about our honesty, our complexity and even our ethical practice. It may sometimes be worth paying the price of these compromise formations – but not always.



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'Opting out is not the answer'

Essi Viding has mixed feelings based on past experiences



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Engaging with the media seems like a double-edged sword. You feel a responsibility to communicate your findings to the taxpayer who funds your work and stakeholders whose lives may be impacted by your research or your expert opinion; but you're also terrified your contribution will come across 'all wrong'.

In my experience, different media outlets vary widely in the extent to which they have a pre-fixed story in mind (for which they are looking for soundbites), how well they do their 'homework', which audience they hope to reach, how many words or how much air/screen time they can use, etc. These are all

factors that can enormously impact how you come across when you engage with the media. I have been both bitterly disappointed (and angry), as well as pleasantly surprised after engaging with the media.

There have been times when I have seriously thought about opting out of media engagement altogether, as I have worried about the risk of irresponsible and inappropriate reporting outweighing the possible ethical obligations to engage with the public. Experienced senior colleagues have, however, convinced me that opting out is not the answer. If legitimate researchers and practitioners do not engage

with the media, the floor is left for charlatans to bask in the media limelight and put forward potentially harmful views.

Despite, on balance, considering engagement with media to be important, I also regularly worry about how my contribution will be perceived by my colleagues or whether it will end up resulting in more harm than good. This worry is not entirely unfounded, as typically there is little or no control over what gets written or aired. In my experience, what someone contributes to an article/radio/TV programme and what ends up in the final product are often very different things. For example, I recently met with documentary makers on three different occasions, for several hours at a time, and spent a whole day filming with them. This engagement resulted in a few minutes of face-to-face interview footage in a TV programme. I was reasonably pleased with what made the cut, but several important and nuanced points that are dear to me did not get aired. When I hear critical comments about colleagues' media engagement, I often wonder whether the critics consider that (a) their colleague's aired contribution is extremely unlikely to reflect the totality of their input, (b) their colleague is likely to have very little control over how their research/views are reported, and (c) as a rule articles and programmes are not prepared for an audience of psychology experts

and inevitably nuance will be lost in the process.

In my dealings with the media, I have found the following considerations useful:

- Practise clear communication: media training is very helpful.
- Do not sensationalise: write clear and responsible press releases.
- Cultivate relationships with trusted and responsible media entities.
- Ask who else is contributing to a piece and try to get a sense of whether the journalist/director is after a particular angle, or whether they are truly looking for expert input.

Of course we now have various social media channels that offer an opportunity to engage with the public in a way that affords more control. I think that as a result we have seen some superb communication about psychology (including by the official British Psychological Society channels) that has really improved the reach of the discipline. I don't find that this type of engagement comes naturally to me, nor can I imagine finding the time between all the work and family commitments. But I hugely admire colleagues who undertake this form of public engagement and I regularly enjoy reading and watching their contributions.

Make yourselves available

A science journalist's view from Tom Chivers

Journalism and academia work on utterly different timescales. For me as a science journalist, that's a fact I've had to get used to. I'll phone a psychologist for a comment on a study that that's out in *Nature* tomorrow, and they'll ask if it's OK to get back to me in a week's time, when I need to file the piece within the hour. I'm like a mayfly trying to understand continental drift.

From a selfish point of view, it makes my job harder, because I have to frantically ring or email a dozen scientists to get a quick comment (often, they get back to me the following month, long after the piece is forgotten, and ask if I still need anything). But more importantly, it interferes with the public's understanding of science.

I've been lucky with my employers, so I've usually had time to phone those dozen scientists. But as the media industry withers, there are fewer and fewer journalists still trying to fill the same space. A science journalist can be expected to file five stories a day. If you make time to phone a scientist and they're unavailable, then

all you have time to do is rewrite the press release, using the sexiest line you can find in it for the headline.



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This is partly why psychology, and science in general, is often badly represented in the media. It's not the only or even the main reason – the main reasons are: (1) that the incremental, provisional nature of science is hard for non-scientists, such as reporters, editors and readers, to understand, and (2) that people read scaremongering and sensationalism, so it's easier to get clicks out of them than by doing careful, well-researched, caveated work, and the media responds to incentives like anyone else.

But it's the problem that scientists can do the most to fix. By making yourself available to speak to reporters at short notice – especially when you have a paper out yourself! – you can do your best to add the caveats and on-the-other-hands that otherwise get missed. It won't fix everything, but it might be a start.

'I have learnt to be much kinder to myself'

Hamira Riaz on appearance issues

A passionate lepidopterist, a grapheme–colour synaesthete and genius author of *Lolita*, there's a lot about Vladimir Nabokov to capture and hold the interest of psychologists. For me, an interview he gave a few months before his death in 1977 sums him up. He comes across as equal parts vainglorious and self-deprecating, playful but serious, imperious yet human.

Famously unyielding in his demands of would-be interviewers, Nabokov insisted on being provided with all questions in advance. For many, this reduced the face-to-face encounter to a stage-managed Q&A affair, utterly devoid of surprise and spontaneity. Nabokov's rationale was deliciously disarming. 'I'm not a dull speaker, I'm a bad speaker, I'm a wretched speaker. The tape of my unprepared speech differs from my written prose as much as the worm differs from the perfect insect – or, as I once put it, I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child.'

Nabokov's willingness to take an honest look in the mirror, to dispassionately assess how effectively he'd articulated his thoughts, to evaluate the impact of his words on others, and then to control the means by which his message is relayed to the audience – well, it's a veritable masterclass in handling the media. Following in his footsteps, I always ask for questions ahead of an interview and I script my answers. Time allowing, I try to review final drafts to ensure written quotes are accurate. I am very camera shy so I rehearse before filming until it feels at least a little bearable to watch back.

In the four years since being on the British Psychological Society's media panel, I've been asked to contribute to numerous articles in both broadsheets and tabloids, had guest slots on local, national and international radio, and made TV appearances in pre-recorded and live formats. This has propelled me to scramble up steep learning curves at speed, on diverse subject areas far outwith my comfort zone, ranging from self-harm to self-care, from character assassination to the psychology of smiling. Everything is always last-minute and you get used to doing things in double time.

As a woman speaking in public, I have realised that social media feedback can get very personal and often has nothing whatsoever to do with what I've actually said. So, I do take extra care with my appearance, because if I feel good about the way I look, the barbs don't hurt as much. As a woman of colour, I look at everything I'm planning to say through the lens of



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racial stereotypes so I am not unwittingly fuelling unconscious biases. As a clinical psychologist, I push back on journalists to ensure that the 'latest research study' is represented in a well-contextualised way.

I won't pretend it's always a bed of roses, far from it. Be prepared for the exhilarating highs to come and learn to push through the stomach-churning lows, and if you don't like the idea of living life at amplitude, it may not be for you. My experiences have re-activated the 'unrelenting standards' schema I thought I'd conquered years ago and provided an unending supply of fuel to my inner critic. But in the process, I have grown a thicker skin, become more skilled at media-friendly straplines that stand out, and learnt to be much kinder to myself. All in all, I can genuinely say, I wouldn't change a thing.



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'Take an active interest in your press releases'

Aimée Challenger and Luke Bratton, plus advice from Chris Chambers

When our lab asked scientists 'Who do you think is to blame for inaccurate science news reporting?', the overwhelming answer was journalists. However, we also found that exaggeration in news stories was strongly related to inaccuracies in university press releases (concise lay summaries written to attract media interest). Specifically, we found that when university press releases incorrectly reported causal relationships from observational research, the odds of the news also containing the same type of inaccuracy was 20 times higher. When press releases reported advice that was not present in the journal article, then the odds of its inclusion in the news were 6.5 times higher. When the press release made conclusions about humans from non-human studies, the odds of inaccurate reporting in the news was 56 times higher.

Importantly, we found no difference between the number of news stories for press releases that exaggerated versus those that did not, and no difference in news uptake for press releases containing caveats regarding study design versus those that did not.

These findings are based on retrospective observational data, so inferences about whether inaccuracies in press releases directly influence news cannot be made. And our findings do not warrant a shift of blame solely towards press officers and press offices. Press releases are often written collaboratively, between press officers and scientists, and in our survey over 40 per cent of scientists admitted their most recent press release was overstated.

So what should you do, in a media environment where the pressure is on journalists to produce a greater output in a shorter amount of time, with the press release often their primary source? We suggest the following three simple points:

- Be clear if your work was not performed on humans. It is unlikely that the general reader would be able to recognise findings that are not directly relevant to them. Making a statement such as 'this area of the brain demonstrates significant plasticity' without explicitly stating that your study was performed with mice could quite easily be mistaken for a finding immediately relevant to humans.
- For associative designs, be careful to avoid causal statements. Even though they are generally more concise and sound punchy, they make implications that could mislead readers and journalists. Readers appear to broadly distinguish between three strengths of relationship: *association* and *moderate cause*, *can cause*, and *cause*. Language synonymous to can cause and cause should avoided when reporting associative findings.

- Above all, take an active interest in contributing to press releases reporting on your research. This may be the only version of your work that makes it to the public.



So should journalists let scientists review what they have written for accuracy before publication? Here are some thoughts on that from Chris Chambers (Cardiff University): you can read more about how he arrived at these conclusions in the online version of this piece.

- If you insist on checking a journalist's copy before they publish, get used to never talking with the good ones. It makes you sound pedantic and untrusting, and you are only ensuring that your work is either never covered or is only covered by journo's who lack confidence.
- Sometimes journalists check their copy (or sections of it) anyway to be sure they have got a particular fact correct. It happens to me maybe 5 per cent of the time. That's fine if it's their choice, but never impose that as a condition of engagement.
- Don't ask to check quotes. Instead, if you have prior concerns, tell them you are recording the interview at your end for your records. If they misquote you, tell them to correct it. If they won't, publish the transcript, tell their editor and never talk to them again.
- If you really want accurate science news, avoid exaggeration in your own press releases and anticipate likely misunderstandings by including a section 'What this study does *not* show'. If you allow hype in your PR then you share culpability for misreporting.
- Accept that you're not special to journalism and neither is science. Independence is key to journalism. Sometimes journalists will screw up and sometimes you will do it all by yourself. Get media trained, find the good journo's and trust them. Basically, get over yourself.

The mini confidence crisis

Catherine Loveday on overcoming worries and concerns

My first experience of doing any media-related work was completely accidental. Some of our research was being filmed for *The One Show* and I was invited to help out in the background, but on my way to the neuroimaging session at York University I received a call from my colleague to say that he was unable to come and I would have to take the reins. It was a baptism of fire, and it's fair to say that I still find TV work the most challenging.

Media work was never something I set out to do, nor was it something I ever imagined I'd get the opportunity to do. But I have always been deeply passionate about public engagement with science. In my capacity as a lecturer, I relish the challenge of getting my head around a complex concept and finding a way to translate it into something that a group of students can understand and be excited by. To have been able to turn my hand to doing this on a wider scale – to connect with a broader audience – has been a real privilege.

In the last few years I have spoken at all sorts of different public events, ranging from large festivals like Latitude, through to talks for the local Age UK or WI group, and panel discussions after theatre performances. Live events provide a great chance to

connect with people, and to encounter thought-provoking questions. I also particularly love radio work, especially when it is live (or 'as live'), although I've also come to learn that a lot of interviews are highly dependent on the presenter and producer. I've been very lucky to work on BBC Radio 4's *All in the Mind* with Claudia Hammond, who is highly knowledgeable and extremely skilled in asking the right questions.

As much as I love the media work I do, I feel compelled to admit that most 'performances' are accompanied by at least a mini confidence crisis. Did I sound like I was rambling? Will people wonder why I have the audacity to present myself as an expert? And most worrying of all, what if I got something wrong, or accidentally perpetuated a neuromyth?! I worry that people will think I'm 'courting fame', or that they will lose respect for me and my research. These are real concerns that haunt me continually, but I try to mitigate this by doing proper background research, and taking care not to step outside of my own area of expertise.

All in all, despite these worries, it is hugely rewarding to share my passion for science through so many different channels.



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'Upholding and promoting the same ethics standards as those that we follow in our research and practice'

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The field of ethics is in an interesting state of flux, which has quickened in recent years, particularly for professional practice and research in psychology. There's a growing appreciation that ethics issues permeate all aspects of our work; for research, from the generation of new research questions through to the dissemination and application of findings, and for professional practice, seeking to understand and respect the social nexus and context of clients. Another key change has been to move beyond the 'medical



models' of 'diagnoses' and 'patient protection' to recognise that our involvements with humans should recognise potential implications and effects that spread beyond the individual person, into their relatives, friends and associates, groups and communities.

Whereas psychological work is by default ethically concerned to protect the identity and confidentiality of individuals, broadcast media almost without exception show identifiable persons, often revealing sensitive details. Increasingly, broadcasters seek to involve psychologists in their outputs. This can pose major challenges for psychologists, because the sorts of programme ideas that come up are often well outside our 'comfort zone' and may envisage the role of a psychologist as being confined to very specific aspects of productions, without recognising the breadth of ethics issues involved in initial planning, through production and editing to the social impacts of portrayals of individuals and groups, as well as the portrayal of psychology as a discipline and profession. Following



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a formal involvement in the Thane review of licensing of children in performances and in the subsequent development of legislation and regulation in England and Scotland, the BPS Ethics Committee several years ago established the Media Ethics Advisory Group (MEAG).

The MEAG is made up of a volunteer team of psychologists with extensive experience in broadcast production, including involvement in developing treatments, script review, screening contributors, supporting contributors during production, providing on-screen comment, analysis and observations, working with chaperones and providing after-care. Our starting point is that psychologists involved in media productions should be upholding and promoting the same ethics standards as those that we follow in our research and practice. We provide an initial review engagement with productions when they approach the BPS for suggested psychologist involvement, where there are clear ethics issues. At any one time we will usually be working with

three or more productions. As well as working with independent production companies we have established links with the major channels, with the Producers' Alliance for Cinema and Television, and with chaperones, and we seek to maintain alignment with Ofcom's regulatory role. We also offer a service to BPS members who become involved in productions where they feel the need for additional support.

With extensive consultation among these various stakeholders and with the BPS Ethics Committee, we are developing a guidance document for media commissioners and producers, 'Psychology and Media Productions', which will spell out our ethical stance, and analyses in detail issues of safeguarding, protection, the ethical portrayal of mental health and the discipline of psychology, with clear statements of the standards that BPS members will work to when engaged in productions. We are seeing this as a new step forward in a process of mutually beneficial engagement and development of the relationship between media and psychology.

Can you be a serious psychologist and be on TV?

Uta Frith has learnt not to look over her shoulder

This is the question that kept nagging at me when I was first asked to take part in a BBC Two *Horizon* documentary. I have now been involved in the making of three such documentaries, and obviously I was not

an expert on all of the topics chosen. For the first one, on autism, I felt I should know something about it after a lifetime of research, but, no question, others knew more about specific aspects of autism and were more in touch with what's important in the present.

Why did I not shy away from presenting topics that I was definitely no expert in, like OCD and psychopathy? I had learned not to constantly look over my shoulder to check whether my colleagues would laugh at me: I was not speaking to them! One of the amazing producers I

worked with told me, 'You are now speaking to a hairdresser in Luton in their own living room, and you don't want them to switch to another channel.' This

was all I needed to shed my anxieties.

Are you ready with a 'No, not me, I'm no expert on this' when asked to appear on the media? It is exceedingly rare that you are the one and only expert on exactly the question that has come up. But, who better than you for knowing who might be the experts that can complement you? For example, I was easily able to identify the people to speak to in the *Horizon* documentaries. Much to my delight they all agreed when asked by the BBC researchers.

Still, there remained a tricky issue: I could not mention all my collaborators nor those who actually did the work, as this is not appropriate in a popular science programme. The Luton hairdresser will not take in these names, not even your own. What is frustrating is that, on the one hand, most of us collaborate widely in their research, so much so that single-author papers are a rarity; but when it comes to public engagement we feel we are on our own. However, the media too embrace a collaborative approach, and the idea that science is a collaborative venture is trickling through.

If we continue to refuse to appear on the media, others will step in. It happens easily in the case of psychology, because here, everyone can feel they are an expert. We need to dispel this nonsense. A good start is to bear in mind that your audience may find it hard to distinguish between the confident but naive folk psychologist, let alone the charlatan, and the teams of scientists who try to understand the incredibly complex relationships between behaviour, cognition and the brain.

Reaching 'Brenda from the chip shop'

Chris French on scientific literacy

Over recent years, the attitude towards public engagement within universities has undergone a fairly radical transformation. It used to be the case that many academics not only showed no interest whatsoever in stepping outside of their ivory towers, they also looked askance at any colleagues who did engage in such activity. Surely such colleagues should be actually doing research, writing papers or applying for grants rather than wasting their time talking to 'the man on the Clapham omnibus'?

These days, many universities do not just tolerate their staff engaging in public engagement and media work, they actually (to a greater or lesser extent) encourage and support it. In these times of increasing competition with respect to student recruitment, such activities can be valuable simply in terms of the publicity they provide for an institution, but I would like to believe that this change in attitude goes deeper than that. There appears to be an appreciation that giving the wider public greater insight into our research and its implications is necessary to improve responsiveness, relevance and accountability.

There's also a growing emphasis upon reaching out to non-traditional audiences. It is all very well writing occasional columns in *The Guardian* or taking part in events organised by the Wellcome Trust, but is 'Brenda in the chip shop' likely to benefit from such efforts?

There is no doubt that some areas of research are of greater interest to the general public and inherently more accessible than others. I am perhaps fortunate in this respect. My primary research area is anomalistic psychology: developing and testing non-paranormal explanations for ostensibly paranormal experiences. It's a topic that fascinates a large proportion of the general public, both believers and sceptics. As a result, I am frequently invited to take part in TV and radio programmes dealing with paranormal and related claims, or to provide a sceptical perspective on such claims for newspaper and magazine articles.

Apart from being inherently interesting in their own right, some topics within anomalistic psychology have wider implications. Two of my favourite examples of such topics are sleep paralysis and false memories. Sleep paralysis is a common experience of temporary paralysis that occurs between sleep and wakefulness. It can sometimes be associated with a range of additional symptoms, such as a sense of presence, frightening sensory hallucinations, difficulty breathing, and intense fear. Not surprisingly, such experiences are sometimes interpreted as ghostly or demonic encounters. I am keen to reassure sufferers that, although such experiences can indeed be terrifying, sleep paralysis is best explained in scientific rather than supernatural terms.

Sleep paralysis often also appears to be a factor in explaining reports of alien contact and abduction,



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but such cases typically also, I would argue, involve false memories. Another ostensibly paranormal phenomenon that is best explained in terms of false memories is that of hypnotic past-life regression. It is worth emphasising that exactly the same techniques are used to 'recover' memories of alien abduction and past lives as are used to 'recover' allegedly repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse (including extreme memories of Satanic ritualised abuse). In the absence of any additional evidence, it seems wise to adopt a level of scepticism regarding all such memories.

So, do the 'harder-to-reach' sections of the general public have a more informed view of sleep paralysis and false memories as a result of my constantly banging on about these topics over the years, on the couch of *This Morning* or in the pages of the *Sun* or *Daily Mail*? In the absence of systematic research, we simply cannot say. But I do know that I am regularly contacted by members of the general public who, after years of worrying that their strange nocturnal experiences might be a possible indication of serious psychological problems, have found reassurance by eventually learning about the scientific explanation of sleep paralysis. And if only one person is steered away from getting involved in dangerous forms of psychotherapy that employ dubious techniques in an attempt to recover allegedly repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse, that will be have been well worth the effort on my part.



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'Exposure can lead to unpleasant criticism'

Peter Kinderman on the benefits and risks of putting yourself out there

Psychology is – or should be – a discipline and profession that spans the whole range of human experience. We are experts in things that really matter to people: relationships, education and learning, health, mental health, politics, sport, crime, work, how organisations function, prejudice and intercultural understanding, and more. Our obligation is, therefore, to keep psychology always relevant to our fellow citizens and to the real world. The media, naturally, are partners in this exercise; if psychology is useful, there is little to be gained if we speak only to ourselves.

Measuring the impact of such engagement is difficult, but I am optimistic about the changes I have seen in the coverage of mental health over my career. From a culture of dismissive 'othering' and unquestioning assumptions of pathology, we are emerging into a world in which people are confident in discussing their mental health in a spirit of openness, and in which empathy is encouraged by a framework of understanding that appreciates how we are emotionally shaped by the events in our lives. Psychologists and others speaking out, sharing their views and visions, are presumably shaping the views and attitudes of people with more media presence. We have also seen increasing understanding of the role of wellbeing in politics – a commitment to consider what might improve a nation's and its citizens' wellbeing. As the New Economics Foundation have said, this is 'economics as if people and the planet mattered'.

More personally, too, there are benefits and opportunities from engagement with the media. The reach and penetrance of established broadcasters mean that partnerships can yield mass participation in research studies (such as some research that colleagues and I did with the BBC on how psychological processes mediate the impact of familial risk, social circumstances and life events on mental health) and then disseminate the findings.

There are, however, a couple of concerns to

be noted. First, in this partnership, our journalist colleagues have unrivalled impact. When we published the results of our collaboration with the BBC, the news story available on the BBC website garnered over 200,000 readers in 24 hours. The scientific paper itself was clearly available via a single mouse-click, and yet was accessed only 200 times. In other words, 99.9 per cent of people relied only on the journalist's version of the story; only 0.1 per cent checked the account that had been through peer-review. We clearly need to have trusted partners in this endeavour.

Also, as a profile is raised, on social media or on mainstream outlets, this increased visibility brings increased opportunity (and perhaps licence) for comment. We need to be aware that exposure in the mass media can lead to unpleasant criticism. Social media, in particular, can be 'corrosive'. Over the past few years, I've been described in social media as: 'a nincompoop', 'a real asshole', a 'pompous buffoon', a 'puritanical classist prig', 'a moralistic cloistered white prude', referred to as 'Mussolini' and seen my colleagues likened to the British National Party. I'd like to pretend that these things don't matter, but of course they do. They hurt and they demoralise – which is what they are intended to do.

Nevertheless, my chosen profession is one that matters to real people in our everyday lives. We all rely on journalists to help us understand the world around us, and therefore psychologists, like everybody else have a duty to engage with the media. If we're proud of our applied science and what it can offer (and I for one, am very proud to be a clinical psychologist) we should be enthusiastic about cooperation with journalists. It's not too difficult; decide what your two or three bullet points are and express them in straightforward language. And, overall, there's more to be gained than lost. Because, despite the trolls, we also get praise: 'Thank you @peterkinderman – thoughtful, humane, holistic + praxis!'. Which is what it's all about.

'Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors for you'

Mary Aiken on receiving the Hollywood treatment

I had no grand plan to 'get ahead in Hollywood'. It just happened. As a cyberpsychologist, I had been invited by the Obama administration to participate in an academic research initiative focused on exploring solutions to technology-facilitated human trafficking. We presented our findings at a White House event, which attracted some media attention. A Hollywood agent made contact with me, quickly followed by a meeting with the President of Entertainment at CBS, who commissioned the primetime show *CSI: Cyber*

practically in the room. I worked as a subject matter expert and producer at the CBS television and film studio in Studio City California. I was involved in everything from brainstorming scripts with the writers, to working on set with actors, visualising abstract theoretical constructs by means of CGI, participating in publicity roadshows... and yes, it was as exciting as it sounds.

I had little or no formal instruction in terms of preparing for my role at CBS, I simply had to figure

it out as I went along. I did, however, draw on my academic training.

Adaptability refers to an individual's ability, skill, disposition, willingness, and/or motivation to change or fit different task, social or environmental features. Hirschi's (2009) longitudinal study maintains that the growth of career adaptability over time is a predictor of the growth of life satisfaction over time. This is key for those who seek a varied career in the behavioural sciences, and strive to enjoy it.

Shortly after the show was launched I was contacted by a book agent who asked if I could write a 'popular' book about cyberpsychology. What exactly did she mean by popular? 'Shorter sentences and fewer references.' (There it is again, adaptability.) I shared the news with a psychologist colleague. 'Oh, don't do it,' they cautioned, 'many a fine academic career has been ruined by a popular book.' I went ahead anyway, calling it *The Cyber Effect*. It turned out to be a joy to leave behind some of the constraints of academic writing. Children are actively engaging with technology, and parents and caregivers urgently need advice. Academics cannot sit on the fence waiting for longitudinal studies – some combination of learnings to date, informed opinion and expert consensus must prevail.

My working week continues to have lots of variety: as academic adviser to Europol's European Cybercrime Centre (EC3); as an adjunct at University College Dublin; as PI on cutting-edge research projects; and as a subject matter expert media commentator. I travel extensively and manage incoming speaking requests through agents and my website. I have experienced everything from being interviewed live on primetime US TV shows, to participating in online chat sessions on parenting websites, to giving a talk to 3000 US Navy Cyber Midshipmen at Annapolis, USA.

In forensics, Locard's exchange principle dictates that 'every contact leaves a trace': this is also true when you engage with the media. Make sure you prepare well and are cognisant of the multiple audiences you need to consider when discussing a topic publicly, particularly those who are vulnerable. This month I will be in Mexico City presenting a report on voter behavioural manipulation online in advance of the July general election. As Joseph Campbell said, 'Follow



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your bliss and the universe will open doors for you where there were only walls.'

In summary: do the work, get the qualifications, participate in research, publish, lecture, get media training, present at conferences; and when you feel confident about your expertise and ability to communicate, engage with media. Don't pay attention to the naysayers: science is built not only on the shoulders of giants, it is also built on individual performance, vision, perseverance, adaptability and good instincts. If you are passionate about your discipline, then go forth and disseminate – by means of both traditional and popular channels.

On becoming 'The Brain Guy'

Dean Burnett has jumped ship

In November 2017 I handed in my notice at my day job as a lecturer and tutor, because I eventually realised my writing, blogging and comedy performing (things I'd always considered hobbies or harmless pastimes) somehow provided the bulk of both my workload and income, what with book deals, media appearances, international speaker invitations, and more.

Point is, I seemed to have become, in the eyes of many but particularly the media, 'The Brain Guy'. A normal academic existence no longer seemed feasible.

It's a very weird situation for me. I've not got a single first-author credit, I've never been acclaimed or renowned in the field of neuroscience or psychology. So, how come I get asked to speak for them so often?

The late great comedian Mitch Hedberg had a brilliant line in response to Hollywood types who kept asking him to do things that weren't stand-up comedy, like act, or write scripts; 'It's like if you work your ass off to become a cook, and someone says to you, "OK, you're a cook; can you farm?"'

I feel the same applies to science, especially neuroscience and psychology (or anything with similar levels of uncertainty). Researchers are often encouraged to do outreach, but the drive, focus and diligence required to achieve success in the lab doesn't automatically result in the ability to share it

effectively with others. So there's a certain perverse logic in the way my numerous failures as a researcher apparently turned me into someone best placed to do communicate my subject successfully.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, my lack of research achievements has often been an advantage. There's no one set of results or school of thought that my credibility (such as it is) rests on, so I can afford to bring (hopefully) consistent objectivity to any science story that I'm asked to comment on. Given the completely unpredictable nature of what's deemed 'important' by the media from one day to the next, this often proves useful.

I'm also not from academic stock; in the tiny Welsh former-mining valley where I grew up, further education was rarely considered as an option. I therefore spend a lot of time telling friends and family about what I do, but without the jargon they've no experience with. You get used to explaining what you do in everyday terms and language. It's a useful skill to develop, perhaps not one readily obtained in the fabled Ivory Towers of academia.

Despite the eye-rolling and scepticism I got from those who felt humour and science were incompatible, I'd advise any scientist interested in outreach to try it. Schemes like University College London's Bright Club are good and popular, but I'd advise anyone to do it 'cold'; sign up for an open mic night where nobody knows you're a scientist and wouldn't care if they did. You might 'die on your arse', as they say, but this is good. It provides empathy, humility, a sense of how others perceive you on first impression. If you're working with the media, your audience will be thousands of people who don't know or care about you more than any other stranger. Experience of standing before such people and winning them over with words and ideas alone can prove invaluable.

Lastly, my own introduction to the media was something of a 'baptism of fire'. Ridiculous newspaper spreads, ludicrously edited reality-TV documentaries, humiliating appearances on the *Guardian* website home page; these all quickly taught me how unpredictable and inconsistent the media can be, and that there's nothing that can't be interpreted or sneakily edited to provide for a predetermined conclusion. You get good at spotting this eventually; when your 'scientific' contribution is simply wanted to provide a sheen of credibility to an otherwise farcical narrative. The list of credits I do have is nothing compared to the one of things I've flat-out rejected.

I can't really advise anyone else on how to pursue a career as a media psychologist. I didn't even pursue it, this is all unexpected to me. I can only say that, if that's what you want, give it a go. Even if it all goes ridiculously wrong, that can still prove useful in the long run. If I can convey any message, let it be that.



Dean Burnett has now left the day job and is mostly freelance. He remains an honorary research associate at Cardiff Psychology School. Find him on Twitter @garwboy drdeanburnett@gmail.com

'I sense a profession fearful of saying the wrong thing, so we choose to say nothing'

Tanya Byron urges us to be brave and find a public voice

I started working in the media for BBC TV in 2000 with the series *Little Angels*, where I worked with families with children with behaviour problems. From there I did a number of other series on the same theme – *House of Tiny Tearaways*, *Bedtime Live* (C4) and others on psychology and mental health more generally such as *Am I Normal?*, *Lose Weight for Love*, *Horizon: What's the Right Diet for You?*, *Child of Our Time*. I generally do one series and several programme comment appearances (e.g. *Newsnight*) a year. I also do 30 hours of clinical practice a week.

Looking back I cringe at the names of some of the series I have presented. When I teach modules on 'Working in the Media' on clinical training courses I always feel the need to justify them. Our brilliant trainees debate with me about the commercialisation of what we do when it's public facing – you've got to grab the viewer as they trawl their hundreds of channels. You might as well not bother making something that sounds worthy if no one watches it.

Indeed my discussions with our bright, young up-and-coming colleagues helps me continually debate the many difficult issues associated with working in the media. Confidentiality, ethics, contributor follow-up once cameras have stopped rolling... these issues cut across all I do in the media, not just TV but also my newspaper columns, radio and other digital broadcasts.

My sense is that there is an innate distrust of the media and how it works. Exploitation is often debated. In addition, trainees raise concerns about oversimplifying what we do, being pulled into soundbite utterances that leave us looking narrow and diagnostic. How can a formulation be explained in a heavily edited interview? More fundamentally, how can I know that what I say isn't chopped up, re-pasted, edited in out of context and ending up nothing like what I intended to convey? (Say it fast, don't pause giving a cut moment to the editor, refuse to resay it as asked unless you agree with the summary suggested by the director.)

All these questions are astute and important. I explain the pre-production editorial red lines that are in my contracts, including budgets for aftercare and follow-up, contractually agreed editorial oversight of my series, clear screening of contributors by off-screen colleagues. I describe the many letter templates sent to readers I can't answer in my columns but to whom I want to send advice and links for further support. I explain how heavily lawyered all my screen and print media are. I also give examples of the many dire broadcast proposals sent to me and explain why I said no.



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I often ask the trainees to imagine that they are on screen for the evening news, commenting on a recent tragedy in terms of mental health need and provision for those affected. I ask them to practise a 45-second monologue about PTSD – what it is, how it affects people, what we as psychologists can do. They have to imagine doing it fast and with a camera stuck in their face. Many then share with the group and surprise themselves at how eloquent they are, how much you can say in 45 seconds and how that 45 seconds could empower someone to find support for themselves or

a loved one. We then talk about how soundbites can facilitate enquiry and allow viewers to empower themselves by finding out more.

Mostly I tell the trainees about the many excellent, ethical, caring and well-meaning media colleagues I have and continue to work with. I wish there were more of us. Our great profession, so often overshadowed by the medics, has a voice and a presence but is noticeably absent from many broadcast opportunities. My instinct is that we may struggle with our self-efficacy, worrying that we can't allow ourselves to be pulled into a soundbite setting for fear it will compromise our more holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing.

We must make ourselves more visible. We have a public health responsibility that extends beyond the services, universities and other places we work in. We know important, evidence-based stuff that can be heard and in and of itself can make all the difference to someone afraid by what is going on in their head. We can educate, normalise, de-stigmatise, reassure. Via the media, our reach is vast.

Of course it is frustrating at times that the only way to convey what we know is within programmes formatted around narrative devices to keep the viewer watching and coming back every week (the 'jeopardy moment', the 'reveal'). Without a doubt there is a risk that we take when we are asked to comment on complex issues in sometimes simplistic ways.

I sense a profession that is, at times, fearful of saying the wrong thing... so we choose to say nothing. I do at times feel anxious about my work being out there, in truth mostly in terms of what my colleagues may think; I'm sure sometimes I could do better. But as cuts are made to services and posts lost, as the funding of clinical training is threatened and as the world becomes more stressful and triggering to those that are vulnerable, we have to be brave and find our public-facing voice. We owe it to our profession and we owe it to the public we serve.



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'There are many good, kind and ethical people working there'

Cynthia McVey was a reality-TV pioneer

Since I first dipped my toe in the world of the media, with the BBC's *Castaway 2000*, there have been commendable developments in the approach of broadcasters and producers in relation to the care and protection of adults and, more particularly, children who participate in a range of activities from documentary/reality television to competitions and drama.

I learned a lot from *Castaway 2000* screening participants to form a community living on the island of Taransay for a year. My qualifications to support them during this time were questioned frequently by one member of the community, who felt that a counsellor should have been employed. This exemplified the assumption that psychologists with PhDs would be academics without practical experience of understanding, supporting and comforting people. There were difficult situations involving the castaways and outside influences, but I am glad to say that I found virtually all of them to be interesting, bright and friendly. I remain in touch with some of them 17 years after the 'first reality programme'.

So what goes into the preparation for these participatory programmes? I and Dr Jacqui McKechnie have developed a careful system that involves psychometric tests including personality, anxiety, depression, psychological vigour and personal questions; a form regarding informed consent; and a telephone interview to talk over the challenges of being in the media glare and to explore issues highlighted by the tests. If the programme involves very vulnerable people or families, or if there are concerns exposed by the tests, a clinical psychologist conducts a full interview, which often involves a home visit; children can be screened in this way.

One recent programme for CBBC involved adventure activities taking place away from home. I telephoned each parent and child to ensure that they were comfortable with everything, and to check that children would cope with being away from home and with lack of success. Parents had my telephone number so that they could contact me with any



'With *Young Musician*, I see all competitors individually and can visit them at any time if there are any concerns'

issues at any time – before, during or after filming/broadcasting. I was asked to do a follow-up call to ensure that all of the competitors who did not progress, were feeling fine and had settled back into their usual life and activities. The care and protection that the BBC required was excellent. It was similar with *Young Musician*: I see all competitors individually and can visit them at any time if there are any concerns. The production team and crew inform me if they think there is something worrying. The crew and production, the competitors and the judges all lunch together; the feeling is one of support and it is clear that production genuinely care about their competitors.

I've experienced the same ethical care with other broadcasters: working with Sky on *Got to Dance* led to my involvement with children in a range of programmes, including children acting in adult drama as Sky's compliance department was keen to take great care with these child performers. And production companies have never gone against my advice concerning the exposure of children to adult material. They have accommodated my advice using a range of techniques like computer-generated imaging, different camera angles, cut-in pieces and sometimes elimination or rewriting of the child in the scene.

Of course, sometimes you will not do things as well as you would like. Sometimes there will be very tight timescales, which can challenge your ability to focus on the care of the participants. I would advise getting a good feel for the attitude of production and broadcaster before agreeing to work with them; and get as much detail as possible. But the media is a very interesting and varied world. It can be frustrating and scary but never dull and there are many good, kind and ethical people working there. You too can do this.

'Try not to think about what your peers will say. This isn't aimed at them'

Claudia Hammond on the importance of knowing your audience

I did my very first interview with a psychologist for a radio programme back in 1991. Since then I've interviewed many hundreds of them for *Mind Changers* on BBC Radio 4 and in my 10 years' reporting and then 10 years' presenting *All in the Mind*. Some were famous, like Albert Bandura and Henry Gleitman. Others were presenting their first paper at a conference. There is no doubt that psychologists are getting better and better at doing interviews. I'm particularly impressed with the way some PhD students explain their research these days. If we want the public to engage with psychology, then in my view it's crucial for psychologists to agree to do interviews where they are happy that their research will be taken seriously. This is your chance to correct some of the common misperceptions about psychology and to explain to all what an important topic it is.

The key to a good interview is preparation. As well as interviewing people, I'm often on the other side of the microphone talking about my books or other topics in psychology, and even now I think about every interview in advance.

A good producer should explain things to you beforehand, but they are getting more pressed for time, so make sure you ask them these questions when they call or email you. Some of these may sound obvious, but often people don't ask these questions until they arrive.

- Which show and channel is the interview for?
- Is it live or pre-recorded?
- How long will it take? TV takes much longer, while they find nice places to film you. To make it quicker you can look around for somewhere attractive beforehand and suggest some options (not a meeting room with a blank wall). Don't forget to look outside too. Many universities have lovely places to film in the grounds.
- What's the format? They might just need a quick clip for a package or it might be a one-on-one interview with you and the presenter, or maybe it's a discussion with other people in it too.

Once you have the answers to these you can start preparing by following these steps:

- Make sure you tell them your job title. Psychologists are often misnamed as psychiatrists or psychotherapists because many people still don't know the difference.
- Listen to or watch the programme beforehand if you possibly can. This is much easier now that so many programmes are online and it helps you to know how to pitch your answers and how much details to give. An interview on *In Our Time* on Radio 4 is very different from a quick clip for a news bulletin.
- If you have a choice of studios to go to, think about which would help you to perform best. Going to

the main studio to be with the presenter might mean a long journey, but some people feel happier doing this because they can have eye contact instead of feeling rather remote in a tiny studio on their own. Others prefer the local studio because there aren't as many distractions.

- Think beforehand about two or three main points you'd like to make, and if you don't know what they want, ask them what they're hoping for.
- Imagine you are sitting in the pub describing your research to a friend who's not a psychologist. How would explain it? In particular think about how to summarise the methodology. Don't list every one of the six conditions. Find a way of just explaining the basics. The aim isn't for someone to replicate the study. You are just trying give a flavour of how research is done.
- Don't write down verbatim answers and try to read them out. Unless you're brilliant actor, it will sound terrible.
- Try not to think about what your peers will say. This isn't aimed at them. The whole point is to engage the public, not your colleagues.
- Remember that it's rare that interviewers are aiming to catch you out. Most interviews are about getting across information that the audience will find interesting. Even if you are part of a heated debate, what the media want is for you to put your case as well as possible. If you know you work in a controversial field, then think in advance about the question you would most hate to be asked.
- Do be prepared to talk more widely about your field. Occasionally people seem to feel they're not allowed to mention research that someone else has done because that person should do it themselves, but they're not on the show, you are.
- To the listener you are the voice of authority on this subject at this moment and you do know loads more than most of them do about it. Don't quote research as you might in a lecture. 'Hammond (1995)' means nothing in the middle of an interview. You can say what previous research has found, but miss out the names unless they are very famous. Don't give long lists of colleagues. If we included lists of everyone who contributed to every topic that is covered on radio or TV, then the programmes would sound boring and we would have to cover fewer items. If you're worried about your colleagues feeling left out you could try asking if you could be introduced as 'part of a team from X'.
- Sound enthusiastic about your work. If you don't sound interested, no one else will be interested either.
- And so your mum can tune in, don't forget to check again when it will be on.



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More online...

See thepsychologist.bps.org.uk for more contributions, and references.

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