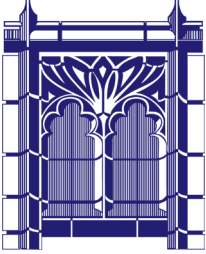


Communicating with The News Media



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL **mentor memo** AUTUMN QUARTER 2009

By Bob Roseth

This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at baldasty@u.washington.edu.

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Some common scenarios

At some point in your graduate studies, you may have to interact with journalists. Sometimes reporters or editors will find you on their own, having networked through their contacts in academic departments or elsewhere as they seek particular kinds of expertise. Other times, you may receive a call from the UW news office, in which a public information officer seeks your help to answer a reporter's questions. In some cases, you may actually seek media attention yourself. Two examples when you might want media coverage:

- to assist in recruiting research project participants from the general public
- if you have research findings that are significant and are about to be published

If you receive a call directly from a reporter, feel free to call the campus news office and confer with one of the public information officers. They have many years of training and can help guide you through what may be new and unfamiliar territory, beginning with an assessment about whether you are the right person to answer the reporter's questions.

About reporters

Reporters come in all shapes and sizes. Some have extensive backgrounds in the subject they cover; others will know very little. You should assume that the reporter knows very little about the subject. Remember, you are not speaking to the reporter but to the reporter's audience—his or her readers, viewers or listeners, which usually represents a broad mix of the general public. Here are some other recommendations:

- When a reporter calls, make sure you know which medium and media outlet he/she represents. If it's not one with which you are familiar, you may want to call the news office to see what they know.
- Find out what general areas the reporter wants to know about and the questions he/she intends to ask. It's perfectly OK to tell the reporter that you are not the right person to talk about that subject and refer him or her back to the news office.

there's more... >

- If you decide to talk to the reporter, you need not respond immediately. Ask the reporter what his/her deadline is—then be certain to call before the deadline. Deadlines are sacred to reporters and essential to news cycles.

Preparing to be interviewed

Take some time to think about the key points you want the reporter and the audience to know about the subject. For TV or radio, you will need to be very succinct. You will probably not have the opportunity to make more than two key points or observations that will end up in the final cut.

You can be a bit more expansive with a print reporter, but being concise, organized and to the point still matters.

As you prepare, ask yourself these questions:

- What are the most important points about, and/or findings from, my research?
- How might those findings further human knowledge (for example, do they contradict what has passed for conventional wisdom) or affect people in their daily lives?
- What makes this research timely?
- How can I best illustrate my findings with examples?

Try to simplify your statements. Statements that are heavily qualified or highly technical tend to be omitted from stories or the qualifications are minimized—nuance is very hard to convey.

Remember, everything you say is “on the record” and can end up in the final story. Do not guess, speculate, or make any statements or comments that would make you wince if they were in the public domain.

Your campus news office is available to help at any time in the process, including providing tips for working with television reporters, how to help you reach the general public when you need participation in a project, or what to do when you are involved in a potential media crisis.