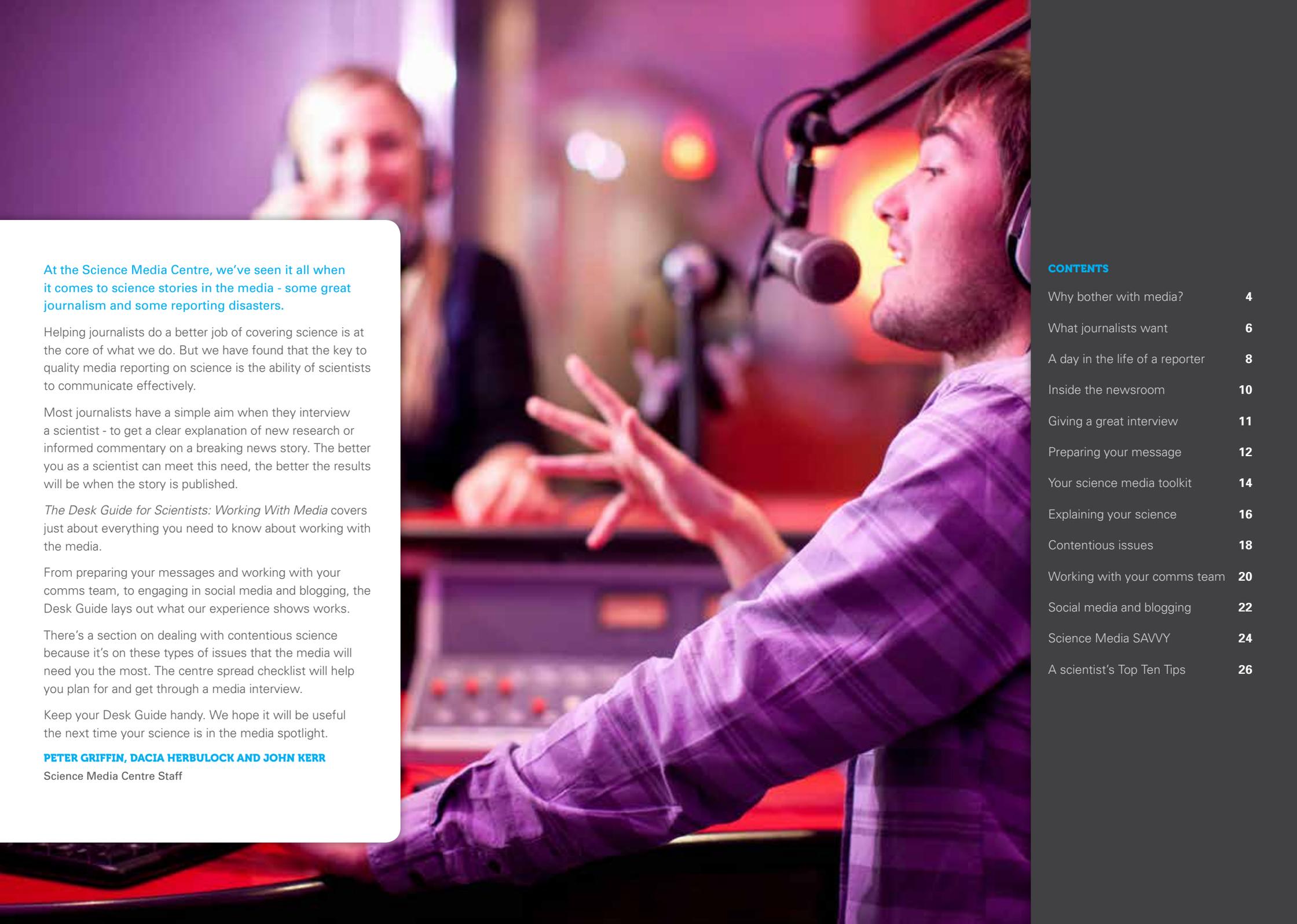


DESK GUIDE FOR SCIENTISTS: WORKING WITH MEDIA



At the Science Media Centre, we've seen it all when it comes to science stories in the media - some great journalism and some reporting disasters.

Helping journalists do a better job of covering science is at the core of what we do. But we have found that the key to quality media reporting on science is the ability of scientists to communicate effectively.

Most journalists have a simple aim when they interview a scientist - to get a clear explanation of new research or informed commentary on a breaking news story. The better you as a scientist can meet this need, the better the results will be when the story is published.

*The Desk Guide for Scientists: Working With Media* covers just about everything you need to know about working with the media.

From preparing your messages and working with your comms team, to engaging in social media and blogging, the Desk Guide lays out what our experience shows works.

There's a section on dealing with contentious science because it's on these types of issues that the media will need you the most. The centre spread checklist will help you plan for and get through a media interview.

Keep your Desk Guide handy. We hope it will be useful the next time your science is in the media spotlight.

**PETER GRIFFIN, DACIA HERBULOCK AND JOHN KERR**  
Science Media Centre Staff

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# Why bother with media?



TIP

You are not alone - if you ever need advice about working with the media, contact your organisation's communications team (see page 20), or get in touch with the Science Media Centre.



"New Zealand's science community is small, so if you're not prepared to talk to the media on a scientific issue, who will? And even if the issue of the day does not fall directly within the bounds of your expertise, you will still know more about it than 99.9% of New Zealanders."

**PROFESSOR SHAUN HENDY**  
University of Auckland

Scientists are busy people. Dealing with journalists might seem like just another distraction. But make no mistake, there are real benefits to engaging with media.

If you are comfortable and effective in front of media you will be better able to explain your research and its significance to a wider public, making it relevant to their everyday lives. You can become a voice for science on important issues, using evidence to help inform public opinion.

You can help inspire young people to become scientists, and share your passion for science with a range of audiences you would not otherwise reach.

Beyond this, practical skills gained from working with media can be put to immediate use to improve grant applications, public lectures, stakeholder briefings, interactions with investors, collaborators and students, as well as other forms of outreach.

We recognise that interacting with the media can be daunting, but it does not have to be an 'us vs. them' situation. International surveys<sup>1</sup> show scientists consider the impact of their media interactions on their career generally to be mostly positive, neutral or balanced, but hardly ever negative.

<sup>1</sup>. Peters, 2012, *Gap between science and media revisited: Scientists as public communicators*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 110, issue Supplement\_3, pp. 14102-14109



I believe that as scientists we have a duty to translate our work into a language that the public can digest, so that they too can marvel in the many exciting discoveries made each year. Not surprisingly, effort made in educating the public of the wonders of our world can be very rewarding.

**DR CORNEL DE RONDE**  
GNS Science



I was seeing a lot of misinformation being spread in the media by opponents of community water fluoridation. I drew on my knowledge of the literature and my own research and published a short media statement which the SMC distributed. I was surprised at how quickly the media responded. My phone rang off-the-hook for days.

**DR JONATHAN BROADBENT**  
University of Otago

# What journalists want

“

Journalists have to quickly boil down a subject to its essentials. When journalists write stories or angles that are too simplistic, or miss the point, it can be the case that the scientist was not clear enough at getting their main point across, and the journalist simply misunderstood. Some reporters will go the extra mile to understand the story before writing it, but many do not have the time and resources or inclination.”

**IAN TELFER**

News reporter,  
Radio New Zealand

Experts have an important role to play in the media cycle. Discoveries and “breakthroughs” can lead the news agenda, while on breaking news stories, journalists look for expert analysis to provide essential background and authoritative perspectives on complex topics.

When the media start calling, it’s an opportunity for motivated researchers to step forward, answer the questions that are on everyone’s mind and bring wider attention to their area of study. You may be surprised by how much of an impact you can have when you engage at the right time, in the right way.

**So what are journalists looking for when they contact an expert?**

**Timely response** - With deadlines looming, often the number one priority for reporters is a quick reply. While you might prefer to put off replying to an unexpected media query for a day – or a week – the reality is that journalists will have moved on the next story, and you will have missed out.

**Keep it simple** - An expert who can explain complicated things in a lively, clear and accessible way is priceless to the media.

**Don’t over-prepare** - It’s rare that you’ll be asked to rattle off screeds of figures or track down the precise details of an obscure published paper. Journalists want straightforward explanations of key trends and big-picture context for research findings, much of which you’ll already have in your head.

**“It’s not really my field, BUT...”** - Even when the topic is outside your immediate research interests, you may be more of an expert than you think. If you know more about the topic than the reporter asking the questions, that may be all they need. If you’re really not the right person for the job, suggest some names to point them in a better direction.

**What the facts tell us** - Sometimes the reporter is seeking an independent, objective perspective on an issue. You may be asked to give an expert opinion on where the balance of evidence lies, and should be ready to answer questions about what actions this may call for.



“

We don’t need to dumb it down, but we do need to express complex ideas in ways that can be understood. And it can be done.”

**JAMES FRANKHAM**  
Editor, New Zealand  
Geographic

“

Getting back to a journalist quickly can mean the difference between an accurate story or one filled with misinformation. Often we’re relying on you to help us through some data we’re seeing for the first time or simply to double check that what we’re putting to air is bang on. My most trusted contacts always answer my calls or let me know when they’ll be free to talk. In nightly television news, minutes can make a difference.”

**SAMANTHA HAYES**  
Presenter and reporter,  
3rd Degree, TV3

# A day in the life of a reporter



**JAMIE MORTON**  
New Zealand Herald  
Science reporter

New Zealand Herald Science reporter Jamie Morton plots the development of a story through the day from idea to finished product...

## 8.30am

I sit down at my desk and read the paper. I want to see how my stories were treated, how I can improve. I catch up on news that broke overnight, browsing science sections of overseas media and check the debates running on Sciblogs.

Press releases from universities or research institutes will be waiting in my inbox. Whatever turns up, via releases or news tips, I ask myself a few questions: Is it new, a world-first? Why should a reader care about it? Will it have some significant impact on their life? Or is it simply interesting or quirky enough to make the grade?

## 9.30am

The first general news meeting is held in the newsroom. I'll pitch my stories to the morning duty chief reporter, and hopefully I'll have chosen them well enough that they'll sell themselves.

## 10am

I hit the phone, lining up interviews. The key is to get quotes from key sources in the bag as early as possible. I'll think about photos, graphics, factboxes. Do we need them? If so, I'll let the photography and graphics teams know early. The middle part of the day is research and writing, maybe a site visit or coffee catch-up on a slow news day.

## 2.30pm

The afternoon chief reporter will ask how my story is tracking. If it is looking good, they'll add it to the newslist for the editorial heads to consider at the afternoon general news meeting. My bosses will make suggestions or query the research. They want to make sure it's a strong story.

## 4.30pm

For anything other than breaking news, the story has to be finished by this time. I'll file my article in our system and it will be picked up, sub-edited, and placed on a designated page.

## 5.30pm

The final newslist is sent out to all reporters and I'll finally be able to see what page my story is destined for. But I don't see exactly how it will look, the layout team will work into the night. I check my inbox and science websites one last time and head home.

## 9pm

My mobile phone rings - a sub editor wants to check a fact. I talk her through it, she tweaks the sentence. The story is finally put to bed and within a couple of hours will be rolling off the presses.

## Don't shoot the messenger

Many people are involved in shaping the final story that appears. A reporter does the interview, but editors and producers have the final say in how a story is covered and what aspects will be highlighted - if the story runs at all. Don't be surprised if other news events lead to a science story being cut short or dropped altogether.

Scientists are sometimes frustrated by headlines on science stories. Don't blame the journalist - headlines are written by different news staff, tasked with grabbing the reader's attention in the space available.



You might not like the headline, but if someone stops and thinks 'bloody hell, that looks interesting' and reads what you have got to say, it's better than them turning over the page and ignoring you completely. ”

**ANNA FAZACKERLEY**  
Freelance writer

# Inside the newsroom



TIP

Always ask how much time the journalists has to work on a story and their expectations in terms of what they want from you. It is OK to ask for some time to review material.



In our newsroom the chief reporters and programme editors put a lot of weight on what scientists have to say about major stories. I often ring around to see if there are science angles on breaking news but I can't reach everyone so it would be great if scientists could be proactive about getting in touch with media. Also if they are unhappy with the way a scientific issue is being covered or have ideas about how it could be covered better it would be great to hear from them.

**WILLIAM RAY**  
Science reporter,  
Radio New Zealand

The world of the media can seem like a hectic, confusing place - that's because it is. But there are a few things you can learn ahead of time to get a better idea of why things happen the way they do.

Journalists and scientists work on very different time scales. The newsroom is a busy place where decisions are made in seconds and deadlines are constantly looming. When contacted by a journalist it is important to be aware of the time constraints they are under.

News journalists often only have a matter of hours to research and write a story, so you can be a big help to them by providing succinct explanations and drawing their attention to the most important aspects of a scientific story, which might not be obvious to a non-scientist.



# Giving a great interview

No matter what type of media you're dealing with, the interview is your moment to shine.

Good preparation and confidence are the keys to a successful interview. Take some time beforehand to think about questions that may come up – especially tough ones – and how you will answer them.

If you are put on the spot by a journalist calling out of the blue, you don't have to do the interview right away. Even on a tight deadline, it's OK to ask the reporter to ring back in 15 minutes so you'll have time to work out what you want to say, check facts and make notes. If they want to interview you about a report or study you haven't seen yet, ask for enough time to read it through and get your thoughts in order.

## Interview dos and don'ts

**Keep your answers brief** and conversational. Speak slowly and try to avoid 'ums' and 'ahs'.

Stop when you have answered the question, **don't ramble** on. It is the interviewer's job to keep the conversation flowing, not yours.

**Be prepared**, but don't script answers – that will sound stilted and unnatural.

Don't use **jargon** or overly exact numbers.

Do use **interesting analogies** and examples.

**If you don't feel comfortable answering a question, say so** but then return to one of your main points. For example: "I don't have that information at hand, but what I can tell you is..."

## The TV interview

- Be well dressed and don't wear anything that could prove distracting such as loud ties or dangly earrings. Relax and don't fidget.
- Look at the interviewer, not the camera - they represent your audience.
- Where appropriate, be expressive about your science. Convey your passion, excitement, disappointment or frustration.



TIP

If there's time, watch or listen to interviews on the show on which you will be appearing. Make a note of what works well and what doesn't.

# Preparing your message



TIP

Test drive your explanations ahead of time on a volunteer or two, and use their feedback to refine and improve what you say.



There's no point in writing about something – even the most brilliant, innovative breakthrough – if no one reads it. We need to present the story in a way that's eye-catching, innovative and draws in the reader. You can do that with colour and spark while still staying true to the facts.

**JOANNA WANE**

Deputy Editor,  
North & South magazine

Before you sit down to give an interview, take some time to gather your thoughts and work out the most important things you want to get across in the limited time you will have.

## “Why should we care?”

It's important to adjust your frame of mind so you can consider things from your audience's perspective. What relevance will your research have for the average listener, reader or viewer? Can you find a way to hook their interest and attention by drawing a connection to their daily lives or things they care about?

## Focus your message

Write down no more than three main points or ideas you want to try to communicate. Sometimes, there will only be time for you to cover off one, so decide which will take priority.

## Fill in the gaps

Work out exactly how much background information you will need to be able to convey to support your message and how you will do this succinctly. You'll want to provide the right amount of context so that people with no prior knowledge of your topic area can easily follow along, but not so much that you get lost in the details.

## Consider the context

Take some time to think about the angle the journalist is likely to pursue. Is this a hotly-debated issue right now? How will you come across in the context of what other groups are saying? Who else will be interviewed? What is the headline likely to be?

## Plan your key message

### Step 1 Communication objective

What is the desired outcome or action you would like to see as a result of this interview?

*Increased awareness of the ongoing depletion of our antibiotic toolbox and support for research into new antibiotics.*

### Step 2 Target audience

Who are you trying to reach?

*Relatives of patients, concerned members of the public, policy makers*

### Step 3 Key messages (with supporting facts)

What are the three most important points you want to convey to this audience?

- 1. No need to panic: -- the outbreak is confined to a single hospital ward and quarantine procedures are very likely to contain any further spread.*
- 2. This is the third superbug outbreak we've had in New Zealand this year, and the deadliest so far.*
- 3. We can expect to see ever-increasing rates of antibiotic resistance - the only way to combat this is with new medicines.*

### Step 4 Restate key message:

In one brief sentence, summarise the main point you want to communicate.

*This outbreak highlights the growing problem of antibiotic resistance, and since new antibiotic drugs take many years of research to develop, we need to start looking for alternatives now.*

We have provided a message planning worksheet on page 15 to help you prepare for a media interview. Here is a worked example to give you an idea of how to use it.

**The set up:** Dr Smith is a microbiologist at a well-known university. News reports are emerging of an outbreak of an antibiotic-resistant superbug at the local hospital. Two patients infected with the resistant bacteria have died. She anticipates journalists may be in contact seeking independent expert analysis of the situation. Before giving an interview, she takes time to organise her thoughts using the message box to the left.



# Explaining your science



TIP

Spend some time finding descriptive, everyday words to explain key concepts in your research.

**You don't need to be a fish out of water, or come across clear as mud. Change how you talk about your research to make it come alive.**

The following tips will make it easier to explain your research and connect with audiences outside your area of science.

**Use clear and simple language** - Work out what you want to say, then boil it down into a clearer, more concise version. Keep going until it feels right. Don't try to 'dumb down' your message - respect your audience by not assuming any prior special knowledge of your topic.

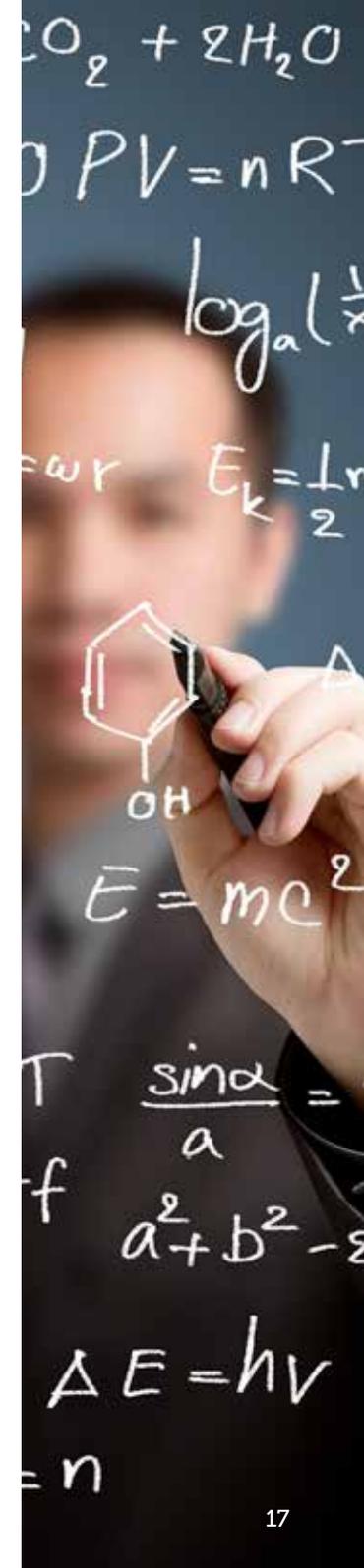
**Avoid jargon** - Using technical terminology when trying to describe your work distances you from your audience and distracts from your message. Think ahead about straightforward options to replace the jargon you rely on, because it can be hard to do this well under pressure.

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
Benthic	On the seabed
Plasticity	Ability to change
Hypoxic	Low on oxygen
Macroscopic	Visible
Anthropogenic	Man-made
Ascertain	Find out

**Paint a picture** - Create a lasting, vivid image in the minds of your listeners. Tell a story, draw a link or describe an abstract process in concrete terms that people can relate to. "It's like..." or "it's as if..." are useful starting points. Giving your audience comparisons and real world examples to latch onto will make your research much more engaging.

**Numbers (rarely) speak for themselves** - Context is everything. Make sure you spell out the message you'd like your data to convey. Never expect your audience to do the maths in their heads. Compare and contrast, summarise, simplify and explain. Use data sparingly, and only to underscore the most important points you are making.

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
The lifetime probability of developing cervical cancer is 0.66%.	One in every 150 women will develop cervical cancer during her lifetime.
Between 1990 and 2008, 586,600 hectares of new forest land was planted, leading to a net increase of 488,000 hectares.	Forested land area increased nearly fivefold over the course of two decades.
Biodiversity is declining at a rate of 6% per year.	We're losing species faster now than at any time in the last century.



# Contentious issues

“

In a crisis, the public and the media have an immediate need for scientific information and analysis to help them understand what is happening and to allow them to make good decisions. ... Any scientist who steps up will almost certainly be better than none.”

**PROF SHAUN HENDY**  
University of Auckland

“

Know your facts and convey them as simply as possible. Look for ways to connect by describing your science in terms of the everyday lives of your audience – if they can visualise it, they can understand it.”

**DR. JAMES RENWICK**  
Victoria University of Wellington

Genetic modification, climate change, vaccination, toxic chemicals, fighting obesity, “dirty” dairying, fluoridation, stem cell therapies, 1080 pest control, deep sea drilling - there's no shortage of hot-button issues where science has a crucial role to play.

Most media interviews involving scientists are driven by genuine curiosity and interest, but contentious issues require special handling, and many scientists can feel intimidated and out of their depth. However it is important that scientists step up where they can make a difference in understanding the science behind a controversial issue.

Before wading in, you need to make sure that you know your material well, and that you can use it to make impact on an audience. You also need to be prepared for simplistic and unscientific comments, and often aggressive argument, particularly in the case of talkback radio and online media.

You may be very sure of the science, but giving scientific facts alone is not enough when feelings are running high. The fundamental concerns raised are rarely just about the science. They are usually driven by emotional arguments, which can be more persuasive than a dry, factual approach. Show that you are prepared to discuss the topic openly and empathise with the audience's reasonable concerns. Be human and do your best to relate on a personal level with real-life examples where appropriate.

## Survival strategies

### Before the interview

Watch/listen to the program you are going to be on so you understand its style.

Check with the journalist whether you will be debating anyone, or taking calls from the public.

Remember the interchange is likely to be short, so practise ways of summarising the issue, the main facts, and your position in a way that a non-scientific audience will understand.

Scan media and social media to know where the public debate is up to on the issue, and to understand why you have been asked to comment at this time.

Anticipate questions you might be asked and rehearse good answers to them.

Have references and facts at your fingertips, including 'big picture' statistics from major reports and trusted organisations.

Research the opposing point of view (eg. by checking out lobby group websites) so you know and can refute their main arguments.

If possible, negotiate to have the discussion on your own terms, not at a time or place that puts you at a disadvantage. Ask for a pre-recorded rather than live interview, if possible. Ask what the general line of questioning is likely to be.

## Survival strategies

### During the interview

Express your informed opinion, clearly signposted (e.g. “Based on the available evidence, my view is that...”).

Don't waste time responding point-by-point to misleading questions or assertions.

When faced with an adversarial argument or conspiracy theory, acknowledge it, refute it briefly, and then move the discussion back to your main message.

Confront emotive defences with emotive arguments.

Focus on what scientists do know, and put areas of uncertainty in context.

Stay calm and sure of your ground.

Be alert for selective use of data, unsubstantiated claims, anecdotal evidence and strongly emotional arguments.

# Working with your comms team



## TIP

Whenever you are contacted by a journalist, or think your work will attract media interest, it is a good idea to get in touch with the communications team - as early as possible - and keep them in the loop.

They can assist you with:

- Advice on the best ways to publicise your research
- Writing press releases, opinion pieces or blog posts
- Media training, from key messages to crisis management

Most research organisations have staff dedicated to managing media interactions, usually called communications managers, press officers or media advisors.

Their job is to help you work with the media. Communications staff are usually former journalists or public relations professionals. They know how the media work and how to promote a good science story.

### Remember key messages



It is easy to get lost in the detail of your research. Think about why you are doing the interview; what is your purpose in engaging with the media? Then identify three key messages about your research that support your purpose and keep returning to them. ”

**AIMEE WILKINS**

Communications Manager, AUT University

### Media can do science well



There seems to be a view that the media often gets things wrong or add 'spin' to stories. We find there are some fantastic science reporters in New Zealand. They assiduously work hard to tell science stories well and right. ”

**MEGAN MCPHERSON**

Head of Communications, University of Otago

### Take the long view



A successful media strategy, much like science, requires relationships and collaboration, often over the long term. You'll have a much higher chance of getting good media coverage of your science when you want it if you engage on other issues where media are seeking help with a story. ”

**EMMA TIMEWELL**

Communications Manager, Plant & Food Research



# Social media: Talking straight to the audience

## Top tips for twitter

*More and more scientists are turning to twitter to find out about science related news, events and outreach activities and to disseminate and discuss interesting research. Here are some tips to get the most out the 140 characters of each 'tweet'.*

**Write as if you are writing a newspaper headline.** Grab people's attention. Use strong, colourful, everyday nouns and verbs. People retweet superbly written tweets.

**Engage in conversation.** Make sure to @mention other people on topics they're talking about, and respond to people who interact with you.

**Keep it short.** Omit redundant words. Limiting your tweet to around 120 characters will allow people room to credit you when quoting you.

**Retweet with careful consideration.** You are displaying your editorial judgement to the world, and what you retweet reflects on you.

**Credit others.** If you're retweeting someone, credit them for their work—it's common courtesy. Use quote marks if quoting someone.

**Rewrite if necessary.** If linking to a blog post or a website that is not your own, don't feel you have to use their headline. Write a better one.

**Check your tweets before publishing.** Tweets can't be edited once published, but they can be deleted and rewritten if you notice an error immediately.

## When communicating through social media

- **Interact with other people** (comment, share, retweet).
- **Ask questions** to encourage interaction and discussion.
- **Respond politely and respectfully to comments.** Sometimes it is best to just ignore.
- **Use spell check** – it only takes a minute.
- **Be consistent** – check your site regularly and build a cohesive social media presence.
- **Don't just talk at people** – aim to actively engage with them.
- **Don't post sensitive or confidential information** – if in doubt leave it out.

## Writing a decent blog

*Writing a blog can involve a large time commitment, but can be incredibly rewarding and prove highly effective as a science communication tool. Here are some tips to help you blog up a storm.*

**Make it personal** - write in the first person. The web is a one-to-one medium, so get personal and say 'you' and 'I'. Say 'you' a lot more than you say 'I'. People want to know how what you are saying is relevant to them. Use active rather than passive voice: 'they found', instead of 'it has been found'.

**Write meaningful, short headlines.** Try to use fewer than eight words and give a strong indication of what you are writing about in the first two words. 'Water quality: what should we do about it?' instead of 'What should we do about water quality?'.

**Write less.** People rarely read all the way through a page so keep your posts short and include your key points in the top 20% of your post. Keep paragraphs and sentences short. Stick to one idea per sentence.

**Where possible use lists, images and small tables** to break up your text.

**Use plenty of links to provide context and background.** Ensure the text you link gives the reader a clear idea of what they are clicking through to.

**Make sure each post can stand alone.** People might stumble on your website via web search or another blog. Link to any earlier posts that can add context, but don't assume the audience has already read them.

**Proofread.** People will judge you on grammar and spelling. Even simple errors can undermine your credibility.

**Post regularly** - at least once a month – but not just for the sake of it. Make sure you have something meaningful to say.

**Get an unbiased opinion.** If possible ask someone objective to read your post for content before you post it. Once it's out there, it's difficult to completely remove and comments you might regret can be reposted elsewhere.



## ON THE WEB

**Sciblogs.co.nz** is a network of New Zealand scientists blogging about their research and topical science-related issues. Contact the SMC to enquire about joining Sciblogs.



# Time to get Science Media SAVVY



SCIENCE MEDIA SAVVY

The Science Media Centre has developed a two-day, intensive training workshop designed to help researchers gain the confidence and skills to engage with the media - and get their science across more effectively.

More than basic media training, this course has been built from the ground up to meet the specific needs of scientists and researchers. We aim to move scientists out of their comfort zone, giving them new tools to connect with different audiences, all while providing direct feedback and support from fellow researchers.

The workshop also offers a unique chance to make valuable media contacts and gain first-hand insight into news media practices during an invited journalists' panel and newsroom tour. New skills are then put to the test with the chance to pitch science stories directly to interested reporters.

Visit the Science Media Centre website for more information on Science Media SAVVY, including upcoming course dates, fees and scholarships for researchers.

## Feedback on SAVVY



What sets this experience apart is in-depth information regarding how the news process works and real reporters/professionals' feedback. The practice pitch to news reporters was fantastic! ”



Better than I had anticipated... I've taken a lot away from it and feel a lot less terrified of potential media encounters in the future. ”

[sciencemediacentre.co.nz/savvy](http://sciencemediacentre.co.nz/savvy)

## Resources and tools



**Sense About Science**  
[senseaboutscience.org](http://senseaboutscience.org)  
UK-based non-profit whose 'Voice of Young Science' programme encourages early career researchers to play an active role in public debates about science.



**SCANZ**  
[scanz.co.nz](http://scanz.co.nz)  
The New Zealand Science Communicator's Association holds regular training workshops and a popular annual conference that focuses on science communication, its methods and impact.



**TED**  
[ted.com](http://ted.com)  
Thousands of videos of people, many of them scientists, communicating with clarity and conviction.



**Scitable**  
[nature.com/scitable](http://nature.com/scitable)  
A resource for emerging science communicators developed by the journal *Nature*.



**Science Media SAVVY**  
[sciencemediasavvy.org](http://sciencemediasavvy.org)  
Dozens of explanatory videos, tipsheets and backgrounders on engaging with the media produced by the Australian and NZ Science Media Centres.



**AAAS Communicating Science**  
[aaas.org/communicatingscience](http://aaas.org/communicatingscience)  
A series of online science communication resources from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)

Books and guides we recommend:

***Don't Be Such a Scientist: Talking Substance in an Age of Style***  
Randy Olsen  
(Island Press, 2009)

***Escape from the Ivory Tower: A guide to Making Your Science Matter***  
Nancy Baron  
(Island Press, 2010)

***A Scientist's Guide to Talking with the Media***  
Richard Hayes and Daniel Grossman  
(Rutgers University Press, 2006)

***The Hands-on Guide for Science Communicators***  
Lars Lindberg Christensen  
(Springer, 2007)

***Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences***  
Michael Billig  
(Cambridge University Press, 2013)

***Standing up for Science***  
Voice of Young Science writing team  
(Sense About Science, 2012)  
[tiny.cc/voys](http://tiny.cc/voys)

# A scientist's perspective

Award winning science communicator  
Dr Siouxsie Wiles gives her Top Ten Tips  
for working with the media.

**1. What's the 'medium'?** Have you been approached by a journalist writing for a daily newspaper, a weekly or monthly publication or a blog? If it is TV, what show and do they want you to be live or pre-recorded? How you deal with a light couch conversation on breakfast TV will be very different from being interviewed by Kim Hill live on National Radio. Don't be put off by doing live interviews. It's a chance for the viewer/listener to hear exactly what you say and the context in which you say it.

**2. Know who you are talking to:** Who are you being interviewed by? What is their interviewing style? Are they 'science-friendly'? Ask the SMC if they know the journalist you have been approached by, or google them and find some of their previous work. Ask them who else they have approached for comment and what the angle of the story is. Far from being out to get us, most journalists are just looking for scientists they can rely on to explain stuff to them so they get the story right.

**3. Timeliness:** Research moves at the speed of a glacier, while the news-cycle is more like riding a white-water rapid. Journalists work to very tight deadlines, so may approach you needing comment within hours. This is often one of the hardest things for us scientists to comprehend. It's perfectly acceptable to ask a journalist to call back to give you time to prepare, but if the story is running later that day then you might only have a short grace period. If you can't accommodate the media, the journalist will find someone else. It's up to you to decide if the story needs your voice.

#### **4. Many hands make the news:**

Newsrooms are full of chief reporters, editors, layout designers and headline writers who will have input into the story above and beyond the journalist who interviewed you. They will all influence how your story is presented. Help them out by being as clear and unambiguous as possible. Emphasise any major caveats and invite the journalist to check any facts with you before deadline.

**5. Get rid of the jargon:** Practise explaining your research in simple terms. Talk to friends and family and ask them what words you have used that they didn't understand. Find simple analogies using everyday objects or situations. When talking about numbers, don't use percentages. While it means the same, 'about a third' is easier to understand than "thirty per cent".

**6. The bigger picture:** Why is your research important? You should be able to succinctly explain why. Don't over-hype its importance, but be clear about the relevance of your research to society. Look for topical examples that draw the link between what you are doing in the lab and people's everyday lives.

**7. Speak in sound bites:** The media will only use a fraction of the quotes you give. You need to encapsulate your ideas in language that will be irresistible to the reporter. If it is, it will make it into the story. The more thought you put into this, the more chance you have of your ideas being broadcast intact and in context.

**8. Be yourself:** Journalists are just as interested in you as they are in your latest research paper. At the centre of every story is a human being and often you can use your personal life experience to great effect in explaining your science. Don't feel you need to give a perfect performance. Just be relaxed, be yourself.

**9. Get some practise:** If you like doing media, or your research is likely to make headlines, then get some practise. My first media encounter was a live interview on prime-time TV. Not ideal! Do some public talks, get on an SMC Science Media SAVVY course and do some interviews on local radio. The more experience you get, the better you will become.

**10. Know your limits:** It's okay to admit that you don't know the answer. Before starting an interview, make it clear to the producer/journalist what your area of expertise is. If they ask a question that you don't feel qualified to answer, or that you really don't know the answer to, then just say so. Feel free to suggest someone more appropriate.

**DR SIOUXSIE WILES**  
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