



# Where **science** meets the **headlines**

## DESK GUIDE

Scientists working with media



# Haere mai!

At the Science Media Centre, helping journalists do a better job of covering science and research is at the core of what we do.

We've found the key to quality media reporting on research is effective communication by researchers. The better you can communicate with the media, the better the final story will be.

*Desk Guide: Scientists working with media* introduces researchers to the essentials. From preparing your messages and working with your communications team, to engaging with journalists and creating your own content, 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 research is in the media spotlight.

**Dacia Herbulock**  
SMC Director

## About

SMC is an independent centre established by Royal Society Te Apārangi with funding from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment Hīkina Whakatutuki. We help journalists work more effectively with the scientific and research community to inform public discussion of important issues for society.



A tall radio tower with solar panels is silhouetted against a night sky filled with long-exposure star trails. The tower is on the left side of the frame, and the star trails create a sense of motion and time passing.

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# Why bother with media?

We recognise that interacting with the media can be daunting and time consuming, but there are real benefits to engaging with the 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 research on important issues, using evidence to help inform public opinion.
- You can share your passion for research with audiences you would not otherwise reach, and inspire young people to become scientists and researchers.
- 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.
- 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.



## TIP

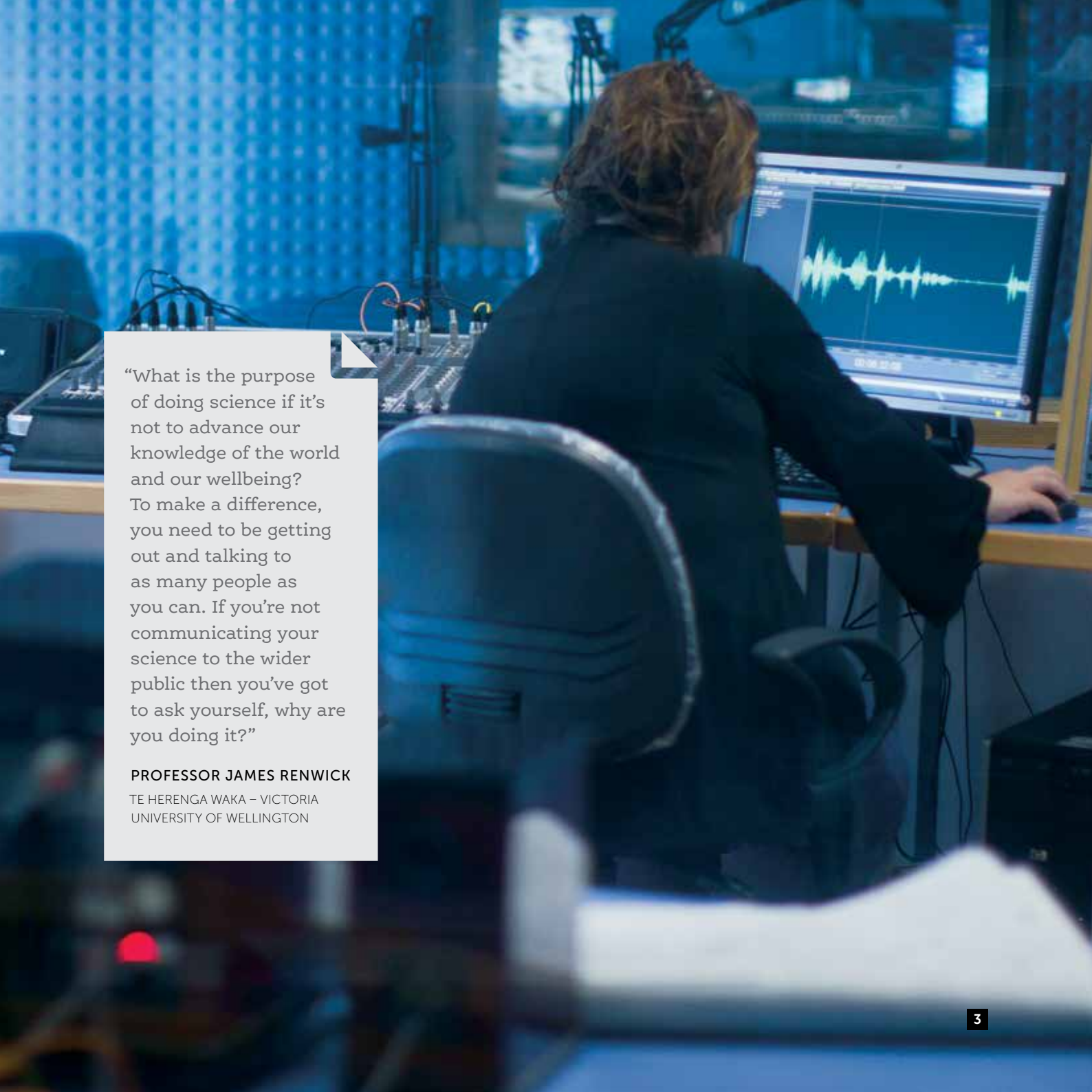
**You are not alone – your organisation’s communications team, or the Science Media Centre can help if you need advice about working with the media.**

“Working with the media enables us to share what we know to inspire change for collective benefit and action. I love that I can now get my research to politicians, decision-makers and Māori communities throughout the country.”

**PROFESSOR JACINTA RURU**

(RAUKAWA, NGĀTI RANGINUI, NGĀTI MANIAPOTO), UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO  
TE WHARE WĀNANGA O OTĀGO

1. 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



“What is the purpose of doing science if it’s not to advance our knowledge of the world and our wellbeing? To make a difference, you need to be getting out and talking to as many people as you can. If you’re not communicating your science to the wider public then you’ve got to ask yourself, why are you doing it?”

**PROFESSOR JAMES RENWICK**

TE HERENGA WAKA – VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON



# What journalists want

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, provide evidence-based information and bring wider attention to their area of study. So what are journalists looking for when they contact an expert?

## ■ Timely response

Often, the number one priority for reporters is a quick reply. If you delay replying to an unexpected media query, you are likely to miss an opportunity to get key information across.

## ■ 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 for screeds of figures or precise details of a published paper. Journalists want straightforward explanations of key trends and big-picture context, much of which you’ll already have in your head.

## ■ “It’s not really my field, BUT...”

If you know more about the topic than the reporter, that may be all they need. If you’re really not the right person, 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.



“When scientists get a call from journalists, they’re looking for someone who can break something down and explain a complex concept simply. Bear in mind they’re often looking for a quick response, which for a journalist can mean within minutes.”

**PATRICK CREWDSON**  
STUFF EDITOR IN CHIEF

“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**  
NEWSHUB LIVE, TV3

# A day in the life of a reporter

Jamie Morton, New Zealand Herald Science Reporter plots the development of stories through the day from idea to finished product...



## 8.30am

I start my day by checking any emails that have come in overnight, and head to nzherald.co.nz, stuff.co.nz and RNZ to see what stories have been broken overnight. Then I catch up on science news, trawling through all the big international sites.

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 duty chief reporter has already fired out an email to let the newsroom know they're in the hot seat, and to tell them what's coming. It's time to decide which stories I'm going to focus on that day. One or two will have already jumped out at me – and I'll already have an idea of how I'm going to approach them.

## 10am

I hit the phone, lining up interviews. The key is to get quotes from key sources in the bag as early as possible. Sometimes that entails firing off questions over email, which scientists often prefer when it comes to communicating their latest research. 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.

## 12.30pm

The duty chief fires another email out – this time asking for "toplines". This is a one line summary – often taken from the story's "intro" – that gives the newsdesk an idea of what the story's about. Having collected these, they'll head into the 1.30 afternoon news conference for a discussion with the editors. If it is looking good, they'll add it to the newslist for the editorial heads to consider at the later afternoon 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 – or stories – must 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. By this point I also will have filed to our website. That involves processing the article in our content management system – writing headlines, adding and captioning pictures, slotting in links, videos and graphics, and tagging the piece to relevant sections of the website. As soon as the story goes live, I'll tweet it out to my followers.

### 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.

### 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 it is covered and what aspects will be highlighted – if it runs at all. Other news events may lead to a science story being cut short or dropped.

Scientists are sometimes frustrated by headlines on science stories. Don't blame the journalist – headlines are often written by different news staff, tasked with grabbing the reader's attention in the space available. If something is inaccurate, approach the journalist who interviewed you in the first instance.

“Journalists and scientists are actually quite similar. They're both asking questions. They both want proof of something before they talk about it. They both have inquisitive minds and want to shine a light on things. Both want to change the world if they can.”

**KIM BAKER WILSON**

TVNZ



# Inside the newsroom

The world of the media can seem confusing and overwhelming. But it's good 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, deadlines are constantly looming, and there are hourly or realtime updates to breaking news stories, livestreams and online content. 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 or less 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 or research, which might not be obvious to a non-scientist.



## TIP

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

“When the media reach out, you have to make a judgment call. If it's a really important issue for New Zealand, then you may need to drop the stuff you're doing, figure out what it is that needs communicating and how you can do that in an effective way. Scientists have to understand we have a really important role to play.”

**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR SIOUXSIE WILES**

UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TĀMAKI MAKĀURAU



# 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. Think about questions that may come up – especially tough ones – and how you will answer them. If a journalist calls out of the blue, you don't have to do the interview right away. Even on a tight deadline, it's OK to ask them to ring back in 15 minutes so you can 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.

## 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 distracting, such as a loud tie 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.

# Preparing your message

Before you give an interview, take time to gather your thoughts and work out what's important to get across in the limited time you will have.

## **"Why should we care?"**

Consider things from your audience's perspective. What relevance will your research have for the average listener, reader or viewer? Can you hook their interest by drawing a connection to their daily lives or things they care about?

## **Focus your message**

Write down three main points or ideas you want to try to communicate. Sometimes, there will only be time to cover off one, so decide which is the priority. Don't get lost in the detail.

## **Fill in the gaps**

Work out how much background information you need to support your message and how you will do this succinctly. Will people with no prior knowledge of your topic area be able to follow?

## **Consider the context**

What angle is the journalist 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?



## **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**

FREELANCE WRITER AND FORMER DEPUTY EDITOR, NORTH & SOUTH MAGAZINE

# Plan your key message

We have provided a message planning worksheet 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 an infectious disease specialist 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 contact her for independent expert analysis of the situation. Before giving an interview, she organises her thoughts using the message box to the right.*





## Example

### 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.

## Media checklist

When contacted by a journalist, the following checklist can help you make sure you haven't missed anything. Following these guidelines can help ensure a smooth experience and a positive outcome.

### ☐ Find out why the journalist is calling you.

- Where are they from?
- What are they reporting on?
- Why are they reporting this now – what is their 'angle'?
- Who else have they spoken to?
- What types of questions do they want answered?
- Can they send you the press release/paper/report they are working from?

### ☐ Get their contact details – a direct telephone number and email address.

### ☐ When is their deadline? If you need time to gather your thoughts or read over material, find out if you can call back in a reasonable timeframe.

### ☐ Contact your institution's communications team/manager.

### ☐ Prepare the three most important points you want to get across in your interview.

### ☐ Call the journalist back within the timeframe promised.

### ☐ When talking to them, make sure you say your three points (most important first) and only comment further if you feel comfortable doing so.

### ☐ Let the journalists know your availability for the rest of the day. Give them your mobile number where appropriate.

Adapted from 'Standing up for Science' media checklist. Credit: Sense About Science and Dr Claire Bithell, UK Science Media Centre

# Message planning worksheet

## Step 1 Communication objective

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

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## Step 2 Target audience

Who are you trying to reach?

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## Step 3 Key messages (with supporting facts)

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

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## Step 4 Restate key message

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

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



# Survival strategies

## Before the interview

**Watch/listen to the programme** 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 exchange 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** (e.g. by checking out interest group websites) so you know and can refute 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.

## 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.



“Your research means everything to you, but you’ll need to explain to me as a journalist, and to our readership, why it matters to them, why it’s important in their life. Be passionate about it – that’s really contagious.”

**JOANNE WANE**

FREELANCE WRITER AND FORMER DEPUTY EDITOR, NORTH & SOUTH MAGAZINE



# Contentious issues

Gene editing, climate change, vaccination, 5G technology – there's no shortage of hot-button issues where science has a crucial role to play.

Media interviews are usually driven by genuine curiosity and interest, but contentious issues require special handling. Many scientists may feel out of their depth, but it is important they step up where they can make a difference in understanding the science behind a controversial issue.

Before you start, you need to be prepared for simplistic and unscientific comments, and often aggressive argument, particularly in the case of talkback radio and online media.

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.

"If you have a controversial issue, the first thing you need to do is acknowledge how people might be feeling or thinking. Share your own experiences because you're a human being too. Listen before you make your responses, then you can give your information and provide facts."

**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HELEN PETOUSIS-HARRIS**  
UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND TE WHARE WĀNANGA O  
TĀMAKI MAKĀURAU



# Working with your comms team

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

Their job is to help you work with the media. Communications staff are usually former journalists or public relations professionals who understand the media 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**

DIRECTOR – COMMUNICATIONS, AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

## 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 work hard to tell science stories well and right.”

**MEGAN MCPHERSON**

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO  
TE WHARE WĀNANGA O OTĀGO

## 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  
RANGAHAU AHUMĀRA KAI



### TIP

Whenever you think your work has potential to 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

# Explaining your research

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.

## Consider context

Respect your audience by not assuming any prior special knowledge of your topic. As science writer Tim Radford once said: “Don’t overestimate your reader’s knowledge and don’t underestimate their intelligence.”

## Avoid jargon and don’t use acronyms

Using technical terminology 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 to the real world 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.

## Numbers (rarely) speak for themselves

A well-chosen statistic can be very powerful when used to underscore an important point you are making. But it’s best to clearly spell out the message you’d like your data to convey. Never expect your audience to do the maths in their heads.

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.
Soil erosion is increasing at a rate of 6% per year.	We’re losing valuable farmland faster now than at any time in the last century.



## TIP

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

# Building an online profile

One of the first things a journalist will do when deciding to interview you is type your name into a search engine. What comes up when you search your own name?

It's good practice to check this occasionally to make sure you keep staff profile pages and other public sites – like ResearchGate and LinkedIn – up to date.

## Social media

Depending on who you want to talk to, different social media platforms may be relevant.

Many New Zealand journalists and researchers use Twitter, which can be a fun way to engage with audiences and discuss interesting research.

Younger audiences are likely to be on newer platforms, rather than Facebook, but this can still be a useful tool for targeting older audiences and community groups.

### Top tips for social media:



#### Keep it short

Grab people's attention. Use strong, colourful, everyday words.



#### Engage in conversation

Make sure to tag in other people on topics they're talking about, and respond to people who interact with you.



#### Share and like with careful consideration

You are displaying your editorial judgement to the world, and what you share reflects on you.



#### Credit others if you're sharing their work

It's common courtesy. Use quote marks if quoting someone.



#### Check your work before publishing

On some platforms, posts can't be edited once published, but they can be deleted and rewritten if you notice an error immediately.



## Dealing with harassment

All researchers should expect their work to be scrutinised by the public, but on some controversial topics this can go beyond what you're expected to deal with.

**Step back and assess:** those supporting your research are often the silent majority

**Don't allow yourself to be silenced:** engaging with media can help get your messages across

**Think about the positive messages** you want to get across

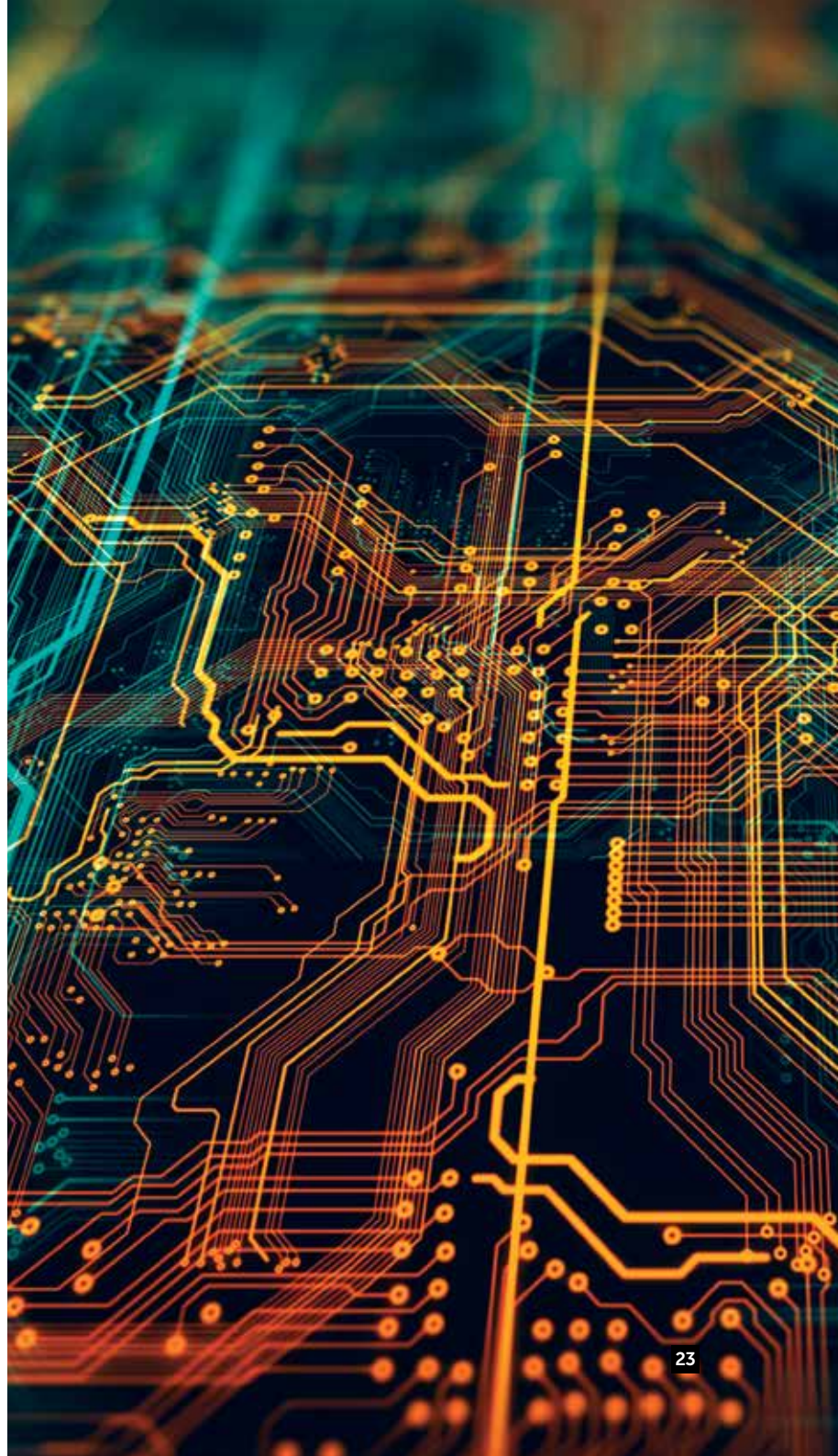
**Focus on those who are interested in listening** to your views

**Be upfront and honest** about uncertainties and limitations in your research

**Maintain perspective:** the attention can often disappear as quickly as it erupts

**Get support:** from your peers, institute, funder and the SMC.

*Credit: Advice for researchers experiencing harassment, UK SMC. [bit.ly/socialharass](https://bit.ly/socialharass)*



# 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.** Eight words or fewer is ideal. 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.

**Use lists and images** to break up your text where possible.

**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.**

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 writing for Sciblogs.









# Media training with Science Media SAVVY

Our Science Media SAVVY programme offers a range of workshops, talks and resources to upskill researchers and build their confidence to engage effectively with media.

These include:

- Introductory talks on media and science communication topics
- In-depth, immersive workshops with input from high-profile journalists
- Specialised media training for Māori researchers
- One-on-one coaching sessions at events/conferences
- Short courses for specific skills (e.g. videos, writing, storytelling)
- Online resources and videos.

Visit the SMC website for more information on Science Media SAVVY options, including upcoming dates and locations and how to apply.

You'll also find ready-to-go resources at [sciencemediacentre.co.nz/diy-online/](https://sciencemediacentre.co.nz/diy-online/) developed to help busy researchers with their communication skills.

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

“This two-day workshop was a very informative and eye-opening introduction to the challenges and opportunities that the media can offer academics across a range of disciplines. It was intensive, practical, and thought-provoking. I highly recommend this workshop, especially for emerging Māori academics who are likely to be called upon by the media for comment or to balance the debate in their respective disciplines.”

**DR ARMON TAMATEA**

(RONGOWHAKAATA, TE AITANGA-A-MAAHAKI), UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO TE WHARE WĀNANGA O WAIKATO

# A scientist's perspective

Associate Professor Siouxsie Wiles, University of Auckland microbiologist and 2013 Prime Minister's Science Communication Prize winner 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 whitewater 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 practice:** If you like doing media, or your research is likely to make headlines, then get some practice. 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.



## CONTACT US

04 499 5476

027 3333 000 (after hours)

[smc@sciencemediacentre.co.nz](mailto:smc@sciencemediacentre.co.nz)

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

Twitter: @smcnz

### LOCATION

11 Turnbull St,  
Thorndon, Wellington

### POST

PO Box 598,  
Wellington, 6140



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ISBN 978-0-473-54930-5