

DESK GUIDE



Where
science meets
the headlines

Scientists working with media

Bula vinaka, Tālofa, Mālō e lelei, Halo,
 Kia orāna, Fakaalofa lahi atu, Mālō,
 Noa'ia, Ekomowir omo, 'Ia ora na, Mauri,
 Kia ora and warm Pacific greetings!



Welcome to the Desk Guide for Scientists working with media

This guide is designed to introduce researchers across the Pacific to the essentials of communicating their research effectively in the media. Inside you will find tips and insights drawn from the Science Media Centres' decades of experience working to improve the quality of news media coverage of science and research.

We've found that researchers can play a powerful role in raising the public profile of important issues, inspiring the next generation and offering guidance for their communities. The better prepared researchers are to engage with journalists, the better the outcomes are for everyone involved.

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

Dacia Herbulock
 SMC NZ Director



ABOUT

SMC New Zealand is an independent centre set up in 2008 to help journalists work more effectively with the scientific and research community, to inform public discussion of important issues for society. We are publicly funded by the NZ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment Hikina Whakatutuki.

Our work in the wider Pacific region is a partnership with the Australian SMC, supported by the International Science Council's Regional Focal Point for Asia and the Pacific.

Contents

Why bother with media?	4-5
What journalists want	6-7
Day in the life of a journalist	8-9
Inside the newsroom	10-11
Preparing your message	12-13
Media checklist	14-15
Explaining your research	16-17
Giving a great interview	18-19
Contentious issues	20-21
Working with your comms team	22-23
Building an online profile	24-25
A scientist's perspective	26-27

Why bother with media?

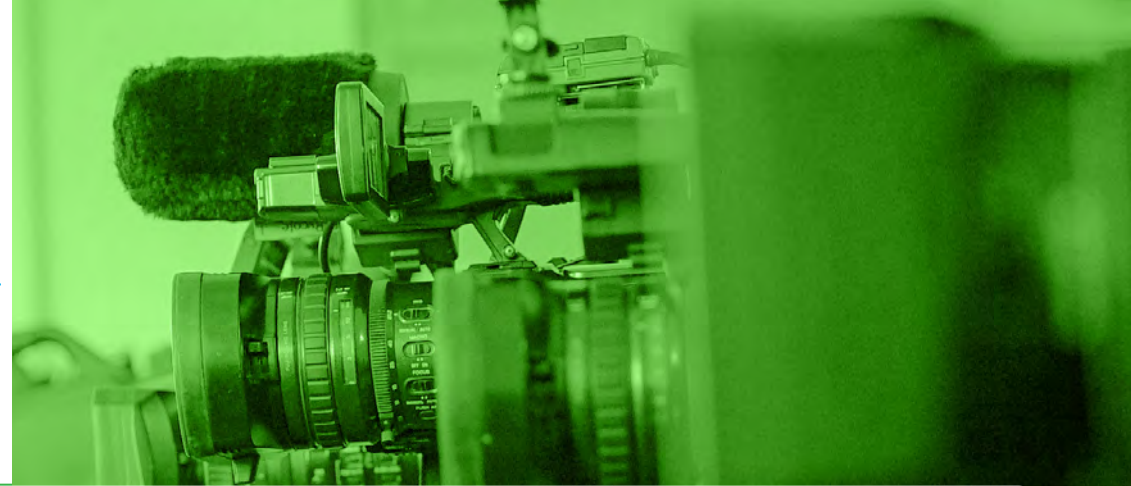
We recognise that interacting with the media can be daunting and time consuming, but there are real benefits.

- ✕ 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.
- ✕ Our evaluation surveys show that researchers generally consider their work with the media to be a benefit to their careers. Most of those surveyed said they saw more invitations to speak at conferences and public events after media engagement, and that it had a positive impact on their research collaborations.

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.

See page 22 for more info.

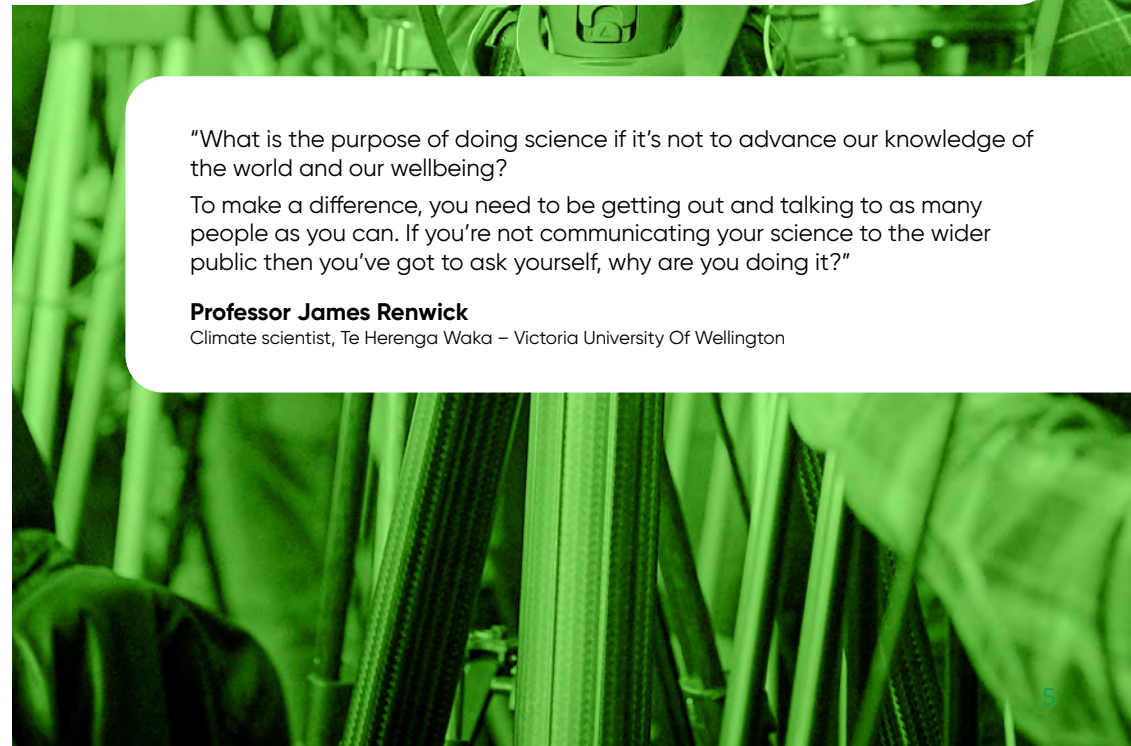


"The media is a vessel that can project our voices with volume and in spaces which we as academics may not have access to, or have never really thought about. If done well, their influence may be breathtakingly impactful.

It's important when working alongside journos that the relationship is built on mutual respect. We all have our areas of expertise – they have the gift of storytelling, and I respect that."

Professor Jemaima Tiatia-Siau

Pro Vice-Chancellor Pacific, University of Auckland



"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

Climate scientist, 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.



“Scientific research and reputable journalism serve as antidotes to the cacophony made louder by technology, where everyone has a voice, an opinion, and a platform to express it.

The foundations shared by both—critical inquiry, evidence-led approaches, peer review, and transparency—provide meaningful context and understanding amid social polarisation and the spread of misinformation.

This underlines the vital roles that science and journalism play as pillars of democracy in our highly contested Pacific region.”

Don Mann

Kaihautū | CEO, Pacific Media Network
Vava’u, Tonga; Ngāti Ruapani, Ngāti Kahungunu



Day in the life of a journalist

Khalia Strong

Senior journalist at Pacific Media Network (PMN)

5.00am

Starting with a hot cup of tea is a must! This hour is packed with cutting audio clips for the radio news bulletin, skimming emails and the top stories across other news sites, and keeping one ear on mainstream radio for breaking news. Also checking our Pacific language shows from the night before for interviews or story ideas that we can use.

6.15am

I walk down the hallway for a live on-air round up and banter with our morning show host. This segment covers local and regional issues, along with sports, and the challenge of sounding upbeat when you're still waking up! Back at my desk, I start assigning stories in a shared spreadsheet for our journos to start on when their shift begins.

8.30am

Our morning radio programme is wrapping up. There are usually 3-4 interviews that need to be written up into articles and our journalists will already be phoning and emailing for further reaction or academic comment on a certain issue. We try to always consider what impact there will be on Pacific communities or find Pacific voices to speak on the topic.

9.15am

We have our editorial meeting where we discuss further news angles and what events or stories are coming out that day, along with previewing the next day. Sometimes interviews recorded after this time can be edited and used for radio news clips or played on our morning radio programme the following day.

10.00am

Our reporters who are out in the field, travelling or at conferences/events will start filing audio and photos that need to be processed for articles and social media.

12.30pm

First articles of the day are written up after getting a second (or third) voice and go to our sub editor for checking. Occasionally, we will send the article to the person quoted to check we have the correct context and nuances. This is how we help build trust and protect our Pacific values of talanoa, which is a two-way discourse. We then publish online and across our social media pages.

1.30pm

Check in with the journalists for progress updates on stories, some have other commitments such as news reading, scheduling posts for social media. Confirm interview slots for tomorrow's morning radio programme and reply to emails. Head home for a nap, turning phone notifications off is a must.

5.30pm

Check missed calls and messages, reply to anything urgent. Get ready to do it all again the next day!



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 an issue, which might not be obvious to someone approaching the topic for the first time.

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, but be realistic and make sure to follow through when you say you will.

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.



"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

Journalist, Anchor - ThreeNews



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?

"The facts are really good - but it's not a one-size-fits-all. You can share the same message, but say it in a way that is relevant to a Pacific family, or that speaks to your elderly aunt or uncle who are listening in."

Dr Apisalome Talemaitoga

Chair of the Pasifika GP Network

TIP

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

Expert reactions

The SMC regularly gathers and distributes expert comments to journalists, such as when there is a breaking news issue or upcoming research paper, so you may hear from us when your field of expertise is in the news. Learn more about expert reactions here: smc.nz/ER-tips

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.**

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?

Step 2 Target audience

Who are you trying to reach?

Step 3 Key messages (with supporting facts)

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

Step 4 Restate key message

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

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.
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.

Publishing a paper?

To help researchers get their important studies noticed by journalists, the Aus and NZ SMCs created Scimex, a website for journalists to access the latest embargoed and breaking research from the Pacific and overseas. Get in touch if you have an upcoming study to promote:

pacific@sciencemedia.nz



You can also sign up for a profile so journalists can find you when your expertise is needed.

scimex.org/expert

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 video interview

- Relax and use your hands and facial expressions.
- 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.
- For tips on preparing for a video call interview, visit [smc.nz/zoom](https://www.smc.nz/zoom)



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.

During the interview

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

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

Anticipate tough 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 other points 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 what the general line of questioning is likely to be.

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.

Contentious issues

Gene editing, climate change, vaccination, deep sea mining – 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.

"Think about who's receiving your message. I always think – is it my elderly aunt or uncle who may not have a good grasp of English, who may be wanting some reassurance?

So I try and couch my message in an empathetic way – in a way that they feel 'wow, this is relevant to me'."

Dr Apisalome Talemaitoga

Chair of the Pasifika GP Network

"Truth matters in journalism. Our relationship with scientists and researchers is absolutely essential, especially when our communities and our audiences are faced daily by a barrage of differing opinions, misinformation and disinformation on different platforms.

The more credible voices we have in partnership with us, the better we can fight the war on truth."

Indira Stewart

In-Depth Investigative Journalist, TVNZ



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.

Kim Meredith, Pacific Media Adviser at the University of Auckland, shares her top communication tips:



Make it accessible

When sharing research, translate the report and data into a style that can be readily accessed and understood by lay people. This ensures it will be widely read and relate to a larger cross-section of people.



It's about them – and you

Pacific peoples are very interested in research about themselves, their culture, history and relating to their home nations. The story of the 'researcher' is just as important as the 'research' – Pacific people seek to map connections between their villages and island nations.



Remember key messages

Just like any great conversation, less is more, and if you want a message to land, it's best to prioritise no more than three messages that will land with the reader and hold their interest.



Your comms team can help

Pacific media and communications experts work to present a balanced story, rather than a "deficit" angle commonly associated with Pacific peoples.

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



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. Do some research to find out which platforms the communities you want to connect with are active on.

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.

For more info, check out smc.nz/harassment.





A scientist's perspective

Associate Professor Sereana Naepi, a Pacific social scientist at the University of Auckland, gives her top five tips for working with the media.



Your relational nature is your superpower

As Pacific peoples, we connect through relationships and stories – this is our greatest asset in media engagement. While other experts might stick to facts and figures, we can weave in the human connections, share how issues affect real families and communities, and help audiences feel the heart of the story. Your ability to relate complex topics back to people makes you incredibly compelling on air and helps audiences truly understand what's at stake.



Step up – our stories need our voices

Don't wait for someone else to tell Pacific stories – that's your job! When you see Pacific issues in the news, pick up the phone and call or email the journalist. Your perspective matters, and often you're the difference between a story that gets a Pacific voice or Pacific peoples being absent entirely. Every time you speak up, you're not just sharing expertise – you're making space for all of us and showing the media that Pacific academics are here, ready, and worth listening to.



Play to your strengths, lift others up

It's a strength to know your stuff and also know your limits. If a story is about Samoa and you're a Tongan in Aotearoa, or it's about climate science and you're in education, don't hesitate to say "I know someone who'd be perfect for this" and give their contact details. Journalists love it when you make their job easier by connecting them with the right person. Plus, this is how we build our collective mana in the media – by looking out for each other and making sure the best voice gets heard.



Be the academic who actually picks up

Journalists work fast, and if you don't answer, they'll move on to someone who will. Be the Pacific academic who's known for being available. Return calls quickly, check your messages, and if you can't talk right then, at least text back with when you can. Your responsiveness becomes your reputation, and soon you'll be the first person they think of when Pacific perspectives are needed.



Know your audience, keep your message

Think of it like talking to your aunty versus presenting at a conference – same information, different delivery. For your local Pacific media, you can drop in some Pacific references and cultural context that'll resonate. For an NZ or Australian outlet, you might need to explain those same concepts for a broader audience. But whatever platform you're on, have your 2-3 key messages ready – the main points you want people to walk away remembering. Make them simple, make them memorable, and make them count.



International Science Council

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