Preparing For an Interview, Part Three: Researchers (for TV and Radio)

BY MATT SHIPMAN

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To many researchers, the only thing more terrifying than doing a taped TV interview is doing a live TV interview. Going on live radio is only a little less scary. But if you are prepared, and don’t panic, TV and radio interviews can be very effective science communication tools.

First of all, here are some numbers to explain why TV is so important. In March 2013, the Wall Street Journal had the largest circulation of any U.S.-based daily newspaper, with approximately 2.38 million readers (including both print and digital subscribers). That is significantly better than the New York Times and USA Today – the second- and third-place finishers – which had circulations of
1.86 million and 1.67 million, respectively. In August 2014, the CBS Evening News – the lowest rated evening news program in the U.S. on a major broadcast network – had 5.95 million viewers. That's (slightly) more than the Wall Street Journal, USA Today and the New York Times combined. (The highest-rated evening news program in the U.S., NBC Nightly News, reaches an even more impressive 7.46 million viewers.) If you want to reach people, TV is still your best bet. [Note: this post was updated Aug. 13, 2014, to reflect more recent subscriber/viewer numbers.]

It’s also worth noting that many institutions offer media training. If your institution is one of them, take advantage of it. Reading a blog post is no substitute for actually standing in front of a camera. But reading a blog post (or, at least, reading this blog post) is definitely better than nothing, so here are some tips on how to communicate effectively when being interviewed for broadcast media. (Note: you may also want to read my previous post on preparing for interviews with print and online media.)

**Things to Do Ahead of Time**

As I said in the previous post, sit down before the interview and write down the two or three key points that you think are most important about your research – and limit each point to one or two short sentences. This helps you organize your thoughts, and gives you a fallback that you can use during the interview (see below).

For TV, it’s also important to be aware that appearance matters. Most people are less likely to take you seriously if you are wearing a Minor Threat t-shirt than if you are wearing a collared shirt (and,
for the record, I love Minor Threat). So if you normally wear a sweatshirt in the office or around the lab, you might want to keep a slightly dressier outfit in the closet – for unexpected interviews (or visits from funding agency officials). Solid colors are your best bet. Busy patterns often don’t look very good on TV, so you may want to leave your herringbone tweed jacket at home. (Note: you may think this is shallow and irrelevant, but it’s not. You want people to be focused on what you have to say, not on what you happen to be wearing.)

Tips for a Taped Interview

Remember to speak slowly. When people are nervous (and they’re often nervous during an interview) they tend to speak very quickly. This is bad for two reasons: 1) it makes it hard for the news crew to edit the piece, because you are running all of your words together; and 2) it makes you sound nervous. (It’s okay to be nervous; it’s not so good to look nervous on camera.) And, if at all possible, don’t use jargon. Most people have no idea what a rootkit, pulsar or ganglion are – even if they are basic terms in their respective fields.

It’s also important to know that most TV and radio stories will not include the reporter’s questions – only your answers. So be sure to include the question in your answer. For example, a reporter may ask, “Is this an important advance in our understanding of how global climate change could affect rainfall in southern Africa?” If you answer “Yes,” the reporter can’t use it, because no one will know what you are talking about. Instead, you should say “This research is a significant advance in our understanding of how global climate change may affect rainfall in southern Africa.”
Keep your answers short. Most TV and radio stories are fairly brief, so they’ll only use short clips of your interview. And by “short,” I mean around five to 10 seconds – not 30 seconds, and definitely not one minute. The longer the answer, the less likely they are to find a good quote – because it’s tough to pull a short quote out of a long-winded answer (especially if you’re talking too fast). That means they’ll use the quote they can get, which may not be the best quote. And if you made a short list of “key messages,” use them. This means that whatever quote they use is more likely to be one that you like.

You can also tag your key messages by prefacing them with remarks like: “The key point here is…” or “It’s important to note that…” This is especially useful for TV, because sometimes the person who is editing the video is NOT the person who conducted the interview. The person doing the editing is just looking for a good quote, and those “this is important” remarks act like a giant neon sign saying “USE THIS QUOTE.”

Also, if it’s a taped interview, don’t be afraid to ask if you can
answer a question again. Reporters want good quotes, and giving you a second chance helps them get one. There’s no guarantee that they’ll give you a second try, but it’s certainly worth asking.

Finally, remember that the reporter is not your friend. Most reporters are ethical, patient and interested in doing a great job. But some reporters are interested in making the story as sensational as possible. So, when you’re being interviewed, always assume that the camera and microphone are on. That little lapel mic that they put on your collar? It keeps recording until they turn it off, regardless of whether the camera is pointing at you. Don’t say or do anything that you wouldn’t say or do on the air – because it might end up on the air.

**Tips for a Live Interview**

The good news about a live interview is that you usually have more than five seconds to answer any questions a reporter might ask. And more good news is that you don’t have to incorporate the question into your answer. The bad news is that there are no do-overs. So be prepared.

A live interview flows a lot like a conversation. The reporter will ask you questions, and you'll answer them. But, like a conversation, a live interview also gives you some flexibility. If the reporter asks a question that’s off-topic, you can change the flow of the interview. For example, you might say, “Our study didn’t look that, but we did find that [insert one of your prepared key messages here].” If the interviewer is any good, this can lead to an interesting new direction for the interview – and helps steer the interview back onto solid
ground.

And, as I said in the previous post, don’t answer hypothetical questions. Speculating is dangerous.

If you remember nothing else, remember this: **you should not panic.** The interview is about a subject that you know a lot about – that’s why they’re interviewing you. You almost certainly know more about the subject than the person who’s interviewing you. So, while you shouldn’t act like a smug know-it-all, you should be confident. You’re the expert.

**Two More Practical Tips for TV**

- Look at the interviewer, not the camera.

- If you’re standing up, don’t shift your weight from foot to foot – you’ll look like you’re at sea.

**About Matt Shipman**

Matt Shipman is a science writer and public information officer at North Carolina State University, where he writes about everything from forensic anthropology to computer malware. He previously worked as a reporter and editor in the Washington, D.C. area for Inside EPA, Water Policy Report and Risk Policy Report, covering the nexus of science, politics and policy.

In his free time, Shipman runs a non-profit organization called the First Step Project that has nothing to do with science, plays guitar badly (but with enthusiasm) and keeps track of the juvenile humans who live in his house. You can follow him on Twitter: @ShipLives.


Anyone interested in hiring Shipman for freelance writing or editing projects can reach him at shiplives[at]gmail.com.