

The Accidental Talking Head: Working with the Media During a Pandemic

KRYS JOHNSON, MPH, PHD¹

¹Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, College of Public Health, Temple University

Correspondence: krys.johnson@temple.edu (Krys Johnson)

When news of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 broke in January 2020, just six months had passed since I completed my PhD program with a focus on chronic disease. Prior to my training I worked as an Emerging Infectious Disease Fellow with the Florida Department of Health during the Zika epidemic in 2015. I also took a class during my doctoral training that touched on the importance of communicating scientific findings to the media. However, I never imagined that those two experiences would be so valuable in 2020.

As the potential risk of spread to the United States increased in January, Temple University's Strategic Marketing and Communications office approached me about releasing a [Frequently Asked Questions video](#) on the disease and its potential impact in the United States. I was apprehensive, but this was an opportunity to quell the rampant fear which, at the time, seemed overblown. I scheduled a time to visit the recording studio and prepped the best I could, combing through the few Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and World Health Organization reports on the subject available at the time.

The day of, I walked into a small studio in the Strategic Marketing and Communications office that managed to be quite intimidating with the amount of equipment and lighting fixtures that were present and pointed at one lone backless chair. I was terrified, but assured that the video could be cut and spliced to cover any errors on my part. I thought the video turned out well; my health education and promotion background left me well prepared to present health information to the public. Looking back, most of what was said in that first video turned out to be wrong, a hallmark of communication on emerging infectious diseases and a source of great humility in the coming months.

Since that day, I have had over 80 media contacts, including live videos, written pieces, podcasts, and more pre-recorded segments. I grew from anxiously preparing a silent space for an interview to taking phone calls for print pieces from my car. I have learned a great deal in a short period of time and share some best practices recommendations for working with the media. While many faculty members run and hide if the media approaches them, a growing number of academics believe that our ability to effectively share our knowledge and expertise with the public will only increase in value when the overall impact of our work is evaluated.

The following sections offer best practices and candid, practical advice on how to prepare yourself for media interviews, gathered through my media experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ask Questions

If you have never done media interviews before, you may feel uncomfortable asking about the minutiae that go into production of news stories. Journalists and interviewers are happy to answer questions because their job is based on experts being willing to speak to them on the record (more on that later). Ask for clear direction not only on the subject matter, but also the story that the interviewer is trying to tell. This can help you avoid being part of a spin with which you may not agree. Ask as many questions as you like; you will give a better interview if you know what to expect and are aware of the limits of your expertise.

Have Three to Five Talking Points You Want to Communicate

Once you know the focus of the story, prepare three to five talking points that you want to communicate to your audience. Use these points when you respond to the questions you are asked. If you watch some of the morning new shows, guests often say things that are not specifically answering the question of the host. In reality, the host is often looking down at her notes and not even listening to the answer. This can be very distracting until you have experience with it.

Keep Your Answers Short and Sweet

Many academics love to talk endlessly about their work and interests. However, a several minute long monologue won't come across well in a live interview and will be edited to small soundbites. It can be useful to imagine the second hand on a clock when you are answering a reporter's question. As you reach 30 seconds of talking, begin to bring your answer to an impactful close. The reporter can always ask a follow up question. Likewise, in limiting the length of your response, be mindful of your diction to limit the potential for quotes being taken out of context. Even Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and one of the most trusted voices on the COVID-19 pandemic, has had that happen!

Don't Be Afraid to Say that You Don't Know or Can't Speak on a Particular Subject

It is more professional and trustworthy to admit that you do not know enough to answer a question rather than to come up with an answer on the spot. If you need to read up on the question and respond via email or text message, offer that. If the question is beyond your expertise, say that, too. The interviewer may ask if you know of someone who can answer the question for them or they may drop the question entirely. I routinely say that I cannot speak on clinical decisions or treatment options because that is not the basis of my training. Be mindful to share the wealth; if your colleague would know better than you, refer the journalist to them. If you are taking multiple calls in a given week and one or more of your colleagues can answer the questions at least as well, if not better, than you can, refer the interviewer to your colleagues.

Your Answer May, and Should, Change as More Evidence Becomes Available

We as health professionals can only answer questions based on the available evidence. The first interview I had in January 2020 would be quite the embarrassment to me now, because much of what we thought we knew about COVID-19 has been refuted. We now know we should all wear masks, that SARS-CoV-2 may be transmitted through the air, and that the pathogen was in the US long before we were aware. As the science evolves, so too should our responses. Likewise, we should acknowledge that new evidence has led us to a differing response. Normalizing the evolution of information can improve transparency and trust between scientists and the public, increasing the likelihood that these updated messages will be effectively disseminated.

Learn the Lingo

While you should not say anything to the interviewer that you do not want repeated in their story, you can begin a reply with, “off the record” or “on background,” to indicate that what you are about to say is not meant to be published. If you trust the interviewer to honor your request and plan to say something that is your own opinion, always say that it is off the record, just to be certain that is clear and ensure that the reporter agrees before you proceed. If something you say off the record is printed, despite the agreement of the interviewer, you have learned the hard way not to work with that person moving forward.

It is Okay to Refuse an Interview Based on an Outlet’s Reputation or the Way They’ve Spun Your Story in the Past

As I said before, even Dr. Fauci has fallen victim to an unexpected spin and quoting out of context. If an interviewer or news outlet puts a spin on your interview which you did not approve, let your university media contacts know; every time that outlet reaches out to you in the future, you can be inexplicably too busy to talk with them.

Don’t Sacrifice Your Own Mental Health

An interviewer may have a tight deadline and a topic that you’d like to speak on, but you just do not have the time or mental/emotional bandwidth to handle one more phone call or video conference. Let the interviewer know that you have competing demands and cannot take the call and suggest an alternate interviewee, ideally a trusted colleague. If you feel you can respond via email instead, you can offer that option, but do not feel as though you must take the questions. Most situations on which we speak are not acute events, so we have to be careful to protect ourselves from burnout wherever possible.

Save Your Favorite Journalists’ Phone Numbers

Sometimes journalists who have successfully worked with you will reach out to you without notice looking for some perspective. If you save the phone numbers of journalists with whom you have built a rapport, you can answer the call and their questions quickly without a lot of back and forth via email. For print stories, some reporters will let you answer questions via email. While you should be prepared to

work with reporters in response to their deadlines, magazine reporters working on monthly issues may give you a few days to respond.

Let Your Departmental or University Media Contacts be your Advocate as Often as Possible

If your department/college/university media contacts are aware of your expertise and your time limitations, they can better field requests for you, reducing the amount of email correspondence needed prior to an interview. These folks can also be the ones to let interviewers know that you are too busy to take the call, even if what you're busy with is self-care.

Be Prepared to Give Up Control of the Process

Not only do most academics like to share their knowledge with others, they like to control the context. The reality is that once the interview is over, the reporter, photographer, editor, and anchor now provide the context. Be prepared to see your quotes taken out of context. Some of your best points may be left out of the story; others may be used in paraphrase by the reporter. At the same time, you never know who may be listening, watching, or reading. Being an effective guest will likely bring you more opportunities to work with the media. It also may introduce you to your next great collaborator, colleague, or research funder who was really impressed by your interview.

Hone Your Craft

Being a good scientific source for the media is a skill to be learned, practice, and refined. Watch your interviews that appear on television, listen to those from radio and podcast, and read those in print. Some will leave you satisfied and others disappointed. That's an important part of the learning process. However, always be forward thinking with respect to what you could do or say differently in the future. Identify any unnecessary verbalizations, such as starting each answer with "So....." and work to eliminate them. Watching news anchors, reporters, and intriguing guests is a great way to see and learn from the talents of others.

(Try to) Have Fun

Admittedly, I am not thinking about fun and laughter as I have been about to start another interview over the past several months. However, working with the press has had its moments of fun, particularly when I got to contribute to a [print](#) piece and a [podcast](#) on the intersection of COVID-19 and major league sports. I've been asked interesting questions and believe that my knowledge has helped others understand the pandemic and what they have needed to do to stay safe. I've met fascinating, talented people and have had professional experiences I would not have imagined a year ago. Try to enjoy the experience.

These best practices are not comprehensive, but they are things I wish I had known or considered prior to this past year. As health professionals, we have an obligation to ensure that the public has access to

timely, accurate, and objective information; media contacts are an essential part of that obligation and opportunity.

Disclosures and Conflicts of Interest

Dr. Johnson has no relationships to disclose.