



1: Turning the tables on the journalists – scientists do the grilling at a VoYS media workshop.

Find your own voice

Haley Gomez presents a guide to getting your voice heard in the media, aimed at early-career research scientists.

Standing up for Science is a free media guide, developed with the support of the Royal Astronomical Society. It is a lively, informal booklet containing interviews with scientists, science journalists and press officers and gives an insight into how the media works. It also provides insight into how the media reports science (including those controversial claims we see in headlines everyday) and gives practical tips on how we can get more involved in public debates about science. The guide begins by introducing us to some young scientists, highlighting their experiences with the media, following on with the science journalists' responses to the scientists' concerns. It contains top tips from university press officers about what to do during an interview, whether it be radio, television or newspaper. There is also a helpful checklist of what to do if a journalist calls you.

Writing team

Standing up for Science has been put together by the VoYS (Voice of Young Science) writing team, including myself and 13 other PhD students and postdoctoral researchers. The team represents researchers from across the country recruited from the Sense About Science's VoYS network. We have been working together on this guide since late 2005, using our personal

ABSTRACT

"Science is big news. However, discussions about science don't always go the way we scientists expect them to. During the recent debates about GM foods, the MMR vaccine, nuclear energy and avian 'flu, there has been obvious public confusion and it is important for scientists to speak out both in the media and in public debates."
Standing up for Science.

From my own experience I know this is harder than it sounds, especially for early-career scientists just starting out who are cautious that their words will be taken out of context by the media, or may get them into trouble with their peers. For this reason, the charity Sense About Science has developed a short guide to the media called *Standing up for Science* to provide some much needed help and advice.

experiences with the media – both good and bad. This has helped us bring together the most useful things early-career scientists should know if they have never spoken to a journalist before. Frances Downey, the VoYS network coordinator for Sense About Science is responsible for

recruiting, and says: "I developed this guide with the help of a fantastic team of early-career scientists who have been involved every step of the way. From interviewing the contributors to giving their opinions on the latest design ideas, they really have been instrumental in pushing the guide forward."

My own first experience with the media was as a PhD student. Our research group had an upcoming publication in *Nature* and behind the scenes our university press officers worked their magic in preparation for the release. We had an incredible response to our research and I suddenly found myself speaking to journalists all over the world, including a scary interview with the *LA Times*. We were asked to do radio interviews and I gave my first ever soundbyte. A more senior academic suggested I should have an analogy or a snappy one-liner ready about the conclusions of our work, which helped enormously. This was an exciting time: the media were interested in our little bit of science in an incredibly narrow field, within the vast subject of astronomy.

The wrong spin

After this initial experience of media bedlam, I gave an interview about being a female scientist in a predominantly male environment to a leading national newspaper. I chatted to the journalist as if I were talking to a friend, talking about future career options and so on. When the article was printed, I almost had a heart attack – there was a great big picture of me with a headline next to it saying I wouldn't dream of working in my department as there were no women physicists employed as lecturers. This could have put me in a very awkward position with my boss. Luckily it was fine and it turns out that I am still in the same department! Throughout this time I found myself coming to the realization that I had no idea how to communicate with the media; yes, I could tell them what I did, but I had no idea to what level I should be explaining myself and what to do to make things easier for myself and for them.

So what makes the difference between a good or bad experience with the media and who can we turn to for advice? This is where *Standing up for Science* comes in. Not only does it have lots of practical advice from press officers, journalists and scientists, but it also has a full resource online. There you can access the full interview transcripts of our contributors, look at further information links and meet the team of post-graduate students who have helped put the guide together. Claire Bithell, senior press officer at the Science Media Centre and contributor to the guide, sums up the usefulness of *Standing up for Science* for early-career scientists: “It is really important that young scientists feel confident enough to get their voices heard in the media, but speaking to journalists can be very daunting and the way the media works is culturally very different from the world of science. So any support that scientists can get to help them understand the way the media operates and how they can work effectively with journalists is very important.”

Standing up for Science has been put together by Sense About Science, a registered charity that works with scientists to promote evidence and good science in public discussion of topical issues – especially controversial ones. The VoYS programme helps early-career scientists to get involved in public debates about science, particularly through their unique VoYS media workshops. These workshops provide early-career scientists with an opportunity to form views on how science is portrayed and communicated, and to put these directly to people at the frontline. These workshops are so successful – with many of the participants wanting to go on and spread the word about getting involved in public debates about science to their friends and colleagues – that they have led to the development of the guide *Standing up for Science*.

Seeing the light

In October 2005, I attended a VoYS media workshop for the physical sciences. At this workshop I had a revelation: journalists are not evil, they are just doing a job – a job we scientists need to understand if we want to get our results into the public domain.

The workshop brought together science journalists (including writers for *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, *The Guardian*, *The Times* and BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme) and scientists who knew how to work with the media. Needless to say, there was a lot of apprehension in the room before we started. The journalists found themselves under a barrage of questions from us young scientists – “Why do you always use the same controversial scientists in your stories?”, “Do you check your facts after an interview?”, “Why do you treat everything as an equal-sided debate whereas in reality research is not distributed in this way?” and

so on. However, much to my surprise, I found that I began to understand and even have some sympathy for the journalists' situation, and most surprising of all, found myself warming to them. Moments before I had been screaming in my head, “science journalists should have a science background!”, and yet as the workshop went on I began to realize that they play an important role as non-scientists, allowing scientists to promote and explain the science to the right level for a non-specialist audience. I learnt a lot that day about the media: I had no idea that newspapers were pitched at the reading age of a 10-year-old, or that journalists have around two hours to complete an entire story including interviews. And they too hate it when eye-grabbing headlines are not appropriate to the story!

Taking charge

Talking to my fellow early-career scientists we realized that the workshop was incredibly helpful – an eye-opener and a valuable lesson in the nature of journalism. One of the important things we learnt is that if you have a journalist on the phone, you can ask them if they can phone you back to give you five minutes to collect your thoughts. We also found out that science journalists are crying out to speak to younger scientists – they don't always want to use the same older scientists time and time again. The workshop gave me a different perspective on the media and the next time I gave a radio interview, I was able to take small pauses and think about what I wanted to say before saying it and take charge of the situation a little better.

There are several reasons to pick this guide up. One, put succinctly by Robin Lovell Badge, Head of the Developmental Genetics division at the National Institute for Medical Research and contributor to *Standing up for Science*, is this: “If scientists do not speak out about their work and about scientific method, they have no right to complain if it is misrepresented in the media or if political decisions affecting science are made on the basis of ignorance.” Some may even argue it is part of our role to represent our research to society, but there is no standard training available to help us speak out effectively. The guide is designed to help us understand the inner workings of the media and to stand up for science.

One of my fellow VoYS writing team members and also graduate from the same VoYS media workshop, Sheena Elliott, PhD in physics at Cambridge University, had this to say on why all scientists should try to talk to a wider audience: “It is vital that scientists communicate their research to as wide an audience as possible if

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Standing up for Science



The short guide *Standing up for Science* was launched on 19 September 2006. Copies are freely available on the internet as well as in hardcopy, and can be obtained by contacting Frances Downey at fdowney@senseaboutscience.org or 0207 478 4380. To find out more about Sense About Science and VoYS go to <http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/VoYS>.

they expect to receive financial backing from public funds, particularly in fields that are seen as more controversial for ethical reasons, or in ‘blue sky’ research where the benefits may not be so apparent. I think younger scientists have to be involved in this in order to connect with the younger community, and also to become more aware of how the public perceive their work.”

It doesn't matter if you are not an expert in the field, take your time and prepare the important things you want to get across beforehand and don't be scared. Not everyone needs to be great with the media, but it helps to have some idea of what is expected of us. The more of us there are talking about science, the more we can influence the media and paint a more realistic picture about the scientific method. This guide takes the first steps towards addressing this issue by pointing us in the right direction and giving an insight into both the journalist's and the scientist's point of view. So, why not pick up the guide and join the debate? ●

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