January 27, 2011 by Brian Croxall

What to Do When Speaking to the Media

Chances are good that if you’re working in higher education you have a fair amount of experience talking to other people. After all, most of us teach in one form or another. Whether you prefer lecture or small group discussions (even in very large classes that use technology!), you will inevitably be speaking to others. So you might not think that it’s all that difficult to speak to someone from the media about your area of expertise. But you’d probably be wrong.

A year ago, I got some attention for a paper that I wrote to be presented at the MLA when I wasn’t able to attend. The paper also drew some notice to the issue of contingent faculty. So I was excited when I was contacted by the education reporter for the local paper. “Great,” I thought, “now more people will know how the university works.” The reporter called, and we spoke for about an hour. And as soon as she hung up, I regretted how I’d expressed myself 75% of the time. I was extremely pleased that the story, which she was only beginning to research, never saw the light of day. In that one hour, I discovered that it’s a very different thing to talk to a reporter than to a class—even on that aforementioned area of expertise. I was glad to get this experience under my belt so that I was better prepared for being interviewed on television (watch us from 1:37:25 to 2:00:50) and radio later in 2010.

Knowing that speaking to journalists is not something faculty members do every day, the most recent MLA Convention not only offered social media and free wifi but also some media training for a handful of faculty members. I was one of a group of approximately two dozen people (including three other ProfHacker members) who had a two-hour training session with the MLA’s Executive Director Rosemary Feal and Mark Aurigemma, a media relations expert who regularly consults with the MLA. Since media training isn’t something that gets taught very often in graduate school, I wanted to pass on a few of the key points from this training.

- **Plan for the interview.** You should never take an interview without having an opportunity to think ahead of time. Know who the reporter is and get a sense of what she generally writes about. Even more important, find out what the topic of the interview will be so you can prepare for it. Take a page out of our students’ exam prep books and think of all the questions that you might be asked on that particular topic and decide what your answer would be. If you do receive a request for an immediate interview, ask if you may call the reporter back in 15 minutes. You want time to prep, even if it’s not much.

- **Decide if this interview is in your best interest.** As flattering as it might be to be asked to give an interview on a topic, you are under no obligation to grant the interview. If it’s not on a topic on which you will be able to do your best, then it’s not worth your time. And “best effort” means being able to say only things that you are comfortable with having your colleagues, potential employers, students, and family read.

- **Develop and then stick to your key message.** When preparing for the interview, decide what your key message will be. According to Mark and Rosemary, this is the single most important thing that you can
do—and it’s something that is a real challenge for highly educated people. You should have three key points at most, and you should write them down. The messages don’t need to be identical or even be on the same theme. But you need to decide what your objective is for the interview and bring the conversation back to that point frequently. After all, if you don’t say what you want, they won’t be able to quote your having said it.

- **Keep it simple.** While working to stick to your main point, it is helpful to speak in short sentences. Sentences with a single one point in them are best. Moreover, avoid jargon. You probably already know that the person calling you doesn’t understand the finer points of *Lacan’s eleventh seminar*, but even phrases like “liberal arts” aren’t in the ken of the general public. And the reporter is essentially a stand-in for that public; remember your rhetoric and be aware of your audience. In other words…

- **Don’t think of an interview as a conversation or dialogue.** As scholars, we’re trained to analyze and then speak or write about our subject in long paragraphs. When we’re teaching, we’ll often ask our students to question what we’re saying or to view one subject from many different perspectives. While this approach works well in the classroom, it almost always adds up to trouble when speaking to the media. The longer you speak on a subject, the easier it is for a journalist to cherry pick the phrases that they like, but you don’t. To pound the equine, then, make sure that you stick to your main points.

- **Don’t let reporters put words in your mouth.** Journalists will often rephrase what you’ve said with a “So what’s your saying is….” If what they say is not something that you entirely agree with it can be effective to say, “That’s not what I’m saying. What I mean is….” Taking this approach makes it very clear what your message is. You need to make sure that your ideas are expressed in the way that you want them to be. (This being said, it’s important to note that most reporters aren’t malicious. They simply are trying to get your perspective right and you’re helping them do their job by being specific.)

- **Practice the pause.** Reporters are very good at waiting after you’ve finished talking. Their goal is to make you nervous and get you talking some more. (For the record, this is a tactic that search committees use as well.) When you’ve said what you’ve wanted to, just stop. Wait. The reporter will eventually speak again.

- **There is no such thing as off the record.** Anything that you tell a reporter is fair game to be quoted in a story. So save the requests for speaking “off the record” for the next batch of State Department cables you find.

If you’ve ever spent time listening to talking heads on NPR, CNN, or even The Daily Show, much of what I learned in media training was familiar. But putting it all into play isn’t easy.

**What have your experiences been when speaking to the media? What advice would you give to someone who has never been interviewed before?**