

Guide to working with the media

Research in a nutshell

Engaging the public with your research

The SNSF supports science communication both among researchers and between researchers and the public. It therefore awards grants for scientific meetings and publications as well as for projects that foster dialogue between science and society.

This guide covers essential tools for communicating effectively via TV and radio as well as in print and through online and social media. It provides practical tips to help you with media appearances and in dealing with journalists.

1. From jargon to language everyone can understand

Scientific language avoids personal opinion and feelings to ensure that the exchange of information between researchers is as objective, apolitical and accurate as possible. However, the typical characteristics of this language, such as convoluted sentences, an abundance of nouns and technical jargon, can be challenging. Moreover, research results are usually published in English.

When presenting your research to the media, you must be able to express it in language that is clear, comprehensible and engaging. In other words, you must be an ambassador for your research. That in turn means translating your research into everyday language that anyone can understand. You can do that by using evocative words, metaphors and specific examples to illustrate your findings.

2. What exactly do you want to say?

To communicate concisely and compellingly, you need a few key messages. These key messages are an indispensable tool for getting to the heart of the most relevant findings from a wealth of data, often accumulated over years of research. This is true for any public appearance in the media, whether a soundbite for a TV programme; a longer interview for radio, print or online media; or for a post on social media or a presentation. What do you want the target audience to know about your research?

Choosing a key message therefore involves asking the following questions: what are the main findings of my research? Why do these findings matter for society? How do my research results contribute to public understanding?

A key message must also make a personal statement. This does not mean a dry summary or an “abstract”, but rather presenting and assessing your most significant research findings in a few sentences. Now, communicating the significance of your results implies having a point of view. You need to be ready with convincing answers to the following questions:

In this era of “fake news”, “alternative facts” and misleading “propaganda bots” on social media, it is particularly important that scientific facts contribute to public understanding. But how do you as a researcher get your scientific findings out to the media?

- To what extent is my research relevant to society?
- What contribution does it make?
- How do I feel about my research results?

The audience must be able to feel what you think, and not only through your words.

That is another way of saying that in addition to your key message, your innermost feelings are conveyed by your facial expressions and the tone of your voice. Nonverbal communication is often more powerful than verbal communication. The audience may soon forget your explanations and the details of what you say. But the essence of your research and why it is important for society should stick with them.

Be prepared

Whether a long interview, a brief comment or an in-depth TV panel discussion, consider the range of possible formats in which you might be interviewed and the impression you wish to make.

Being prepared allows you to respond effectively during an interview. Experts who let a little of their personality show come across better than a cold-blooded purveyor of facts. Researchers or research managers facing a tough interviewer are more persuasive if they share their own concerns.

Distinguish between statements based on science and political statements. Respond accordingly as an expert and employee of your institution or as a private person. Don't be afraid to say "I can only answer that personally". When in doubt, refrain from answering questions outside your area of expertise. If you're not certain of something, say "I don't know" or "I'd rather not comment on that".

3. Tell a story

Think about the stories behind your science. Research can be likened to an adventure. When you first started your investigation, you wished to fill a gap in knowledge. So you set out, overcame obstacles and difficulties, and finally achieved your goal with new insights and greater maturity. Or maybe what you learned – your findings – are the real story.

Whatever the case, now you want to share this knowledge with the public. Traditional storytelling is a powerful way of arousing people's interest, conveying facts and emotions to them and, in the best case, changing the way they think. The same applies to stories about research. For the audience, listening to you should be like seeing a movie. And remember: not every story has to be as long as Homer's *Odyssey*.

4. How to reach the media

Let the media office of your institution know that you would like to go public with your research results or that you have received a request for an interview. You can also get help from the SNSF's Communications division or from the head of knowledge transfer of your National Research Programme. They will be happy to support you with media relations and can also report on your research in their own publications (see also "The SNSF supports you" in the box below).

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to reach out to the media yourself. Here are the most important steps for how to proceed.

4.1 Follow the public debate on your area of research

- Which media outlets pay attention to my field of research?
- Which editing desks report on it?
- Who are the specialist journalists I could contact directly?

Print and online media

Check the publishing information for how to contact the relevant editing desk or – even better – journalists who cover your field of activity.

Radio/TV

To contact SRF, go to www.srf.ch and find the appropriate editing desk. Check the SRF archive to see what has already been covered in your field of research. Look for the authors of those reports or ask the editing desk who you should contact.

Local TV and local radio

Call the general phone number and ask who might cover your area of research.

4.2 Making initial contact: a personal email

Send an email to the relevant journalist. Compose a subject line that stands out amid the flood of emails media professionals receive every day. Make it concise, clear and compelling.

If you cannot establish personal contact, ask at the main number for the email address and direct telephone number of the appropriate desk and write to them directly.

Also, you can often find the contact information for science journalists in their social media profile.

4.3 Follow up by telephone

After sending an email, it pays to contact the media representative by telephone and make your pitch in person.

5. How to prepare for an interview

- Draw up a factsheet about your project (one page maximum), including the most important topics you want to discuss.
- Prepare one to three (maximum) key messages.
- Be clear about why you think your research is important to society.
- Look for a “hook”, something newsworthy about your research – for example a current event – to capture the public’s attention.
- Think of specific examples from everyday life that you can use to illustrate your arguments. Look for appropriate comparisons or metaphors. But be careful: metaphors can be tricky. Make sure the comparison is meaningful.
- Write the way you speak. Avoid passive constructions where possible and appropriate; use strong verbs; and speak or write directly, clearly and compellingly.
- Use as few numbers as possible.
- Choose good photographs or graphics to illustrate your message.

5.1 Verbal traps

- Avoid foreign words and abbreviations. If technical terms are unavoidable, explain them briefly in everyday language.
- Short words are better than long ones.
- Short sentences are stronger than convoluted ones. But the rhythm makes the music: an endless string of short sentences eventually becomes tiresome.

5.2 Think about your audience

Every interview and every conversation between researchers and media professionals involves a clear allocation of roles. The journalist asks the questions, and the expert provides the answers. At the same time, both sides are always mindful of an invisible other. In this sense, every interview is a relationship between three parties.

- The task of the journalist is to ask questions on behalf of the audience.
- The interviewee answers the journalist’s questions, but actually directs those answers to the (invisible) audience.

Depending on the medium and the type of reporting, media professionals rely on different forms and lengths of communication. A news report can usually accommodate only a short message. The starting point for that is a brief interview between you and a journalist. In longer formats, you will be able to have your say in more detail. But here, too, the rule is to keep your answers concise, clear and compelling.

5.3 Always request a preliminary interview

Media professionals are invariably under time pressure. Nevertheless, you should insist on clarifying the following questions in advance:

- What is the purpose of the report?

- What is the exact topic of the interview?
- In which medium will it be published and when?
- How long will the interview last?
- How much space will you have for your statements?
- Will other people appear in the report who hold an opposing position?

Only once these questions have been clarified can you decide whether to participate or not.

Do not leave the preliminary interview to your media office. Talk to your interviewer personally before the interview. That will give you a sense for how the person ticks, what they know about your research and what angle, if any, they have in mind.

Ask the person to provide you with the interview questions. However, do not expect all questions to be made available to you before the interview.

This is also in your interest. If you know exactly what the questions are, you will be tempted to memorise suitable answers. Your key messages help you to answer appropriately based on your wealth of experience and to express yourself engagingly. In this way you will come across more convincingly than if you answer by rote.

Media professionals are often generalists. On the other hand, as the interviewee you have expertise and detailed knowledge about your particular field. In the preliminary interview, give the interviewer additional important information on the topic. Provide documents, facts and images that the media professionals can include in their report. A good interview is a collaborative effort – even if the journalist asks you tough questions. That is part of being a journalist.

Watch out for “nasty questions”

Don't be caught off guard. Before the interview, think about any challenging or tricky questions you might be confronted with. And think about appropriate responses without memorising them.

5.4 Discuss the ground rules

According to media law, you have the right to see all your quotes, whether direct or indirect, before publication. You are also permitted to clarify your statements in portions of articles submitted to you for approval. Be sure to make clear to the interviewer in the preliminary interview that you wish to exercise this right.

On background or on the record?

Especially in the case of research, “background” interviews or discussions are common: when it comes to complex topics, journalists need information. First, clarify whether the journalist intends to quote you by name. Together with the journalist, agree precisely what information is intended for what purpose. If any aspect of your research is not to be published for the time being, hold it back even in a back-ground interview.

5.5 During the interview

Journalists try to lead the interview towards a goal according to the rule “She who asks, leads”. However, as the interviewee you can also take the initiative and steer the interview according to the rule “He who answers should know where he is going”.

Here, too, the key message proves an excellent guide. Take the question and develop your own chain of argumentation. That is one way of working in your key messages during the interview. However, this approach should not be used to avoid uncomfortable questions. Audiences do not reward evasive strategies; they arouse mistrust.

5.6 After the interview

As mentioned in the ground rules, you have the right to see all of your quotes. If you have not already done so in the preliminary interview, make clear after the interview, at the latest, that you insist on this right. But you may not retract your quotes. Once an interview has taken place, it is considered a verbal contract that cannot be broken.

Often journalists are happy to run an article by an expert before handing it in. You may offer to check the entire article for accuracy. However, make sure that you only check scientific facts and not any interpretations or statements of the author.

If the article is exclusively about you or your research, please do ask to review the entire article. This is not obligatory for media professionals, but fairness dictates it.

6 Conclusion

This guide describes the most important tools and steps to help researchers communicate effectively through the media, including social media. But a guide is not the final word. Practice is crucial for successful communication. That is why the motto of the Swiss National Science Foundation’s media courses is “Practice, practice, practice”.

The SNSF supports you

- through the Agora funding scheme, which is geared towards dialogue with the public. Communicate your research to an interested audience. We finance projects with up to CHF 200,000.
- through free communication courses. Learn to summarise your knowledge in language that is understandable to laypeople. Practise your professional presentation in the media. Prepare yourself for a constructive dialogue with politicians.

Detailed information: [Communicating with the public](#)

The SNSF also disseminates selected research results via its own channels, for example by publishing research news and press releases. Together with the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, we publish the quarterly research magazine Horizons.

- [Communication of findings in research news and press releases](#)
- [Horizons - The Swiss Research Magazine](#)

SNSF media courses for researchers

Developing key messages is hard. In the SNSF media courses, you will have the opportunity to practice developing a key message and expressing it appropriately and effectively in real interview situations. In one- to two-day courses led by experienced editors as well as journalists, you will learn how to make a strong impression in the mass media. Both in front of the camera and microphone as well as in dealing with print media, and in video interviews and video conferences. You gain insight into the work of colleagues, honest feedback and practical tips.

You will develop simple, concise language that will generate interest and highlight the true value of your research.

The courses are aimed at researchers who have at least some initial research experience at postdoctoral level and who are supported by the SNSF or who are involved in a funded project.

www.snsf.ch/mediacourses