

Dealing with the Media

Jarvis Miller

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Jarvis (1979) "Dealing with the Media," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 62: Iss. 4.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1880>

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Dealing with the Media

Abstract

As a research administrator, I believe totally in the validity of our research mission and goals. These goals are consistent with and in the best interest of our tax-paying citizens. (Papers from the National Agricultural Science Information Conference, Ames, Iowa.)

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As a research administrator, I believe totally in the validity of our research mission and goals. These goals are consistent with and in the best interest of our tax-paying citizens. I see nothing inherently wrong with utilizing the media resources available to promote and enhance our position to pursue our legal objective.

In making this strong statement, I do not want to imply that the media should serve a propaganda function to promote the self-serving interest of an agency or institution. We must be sure that our research programs are sound and in the best interest of the public.

If we do our popular media work well, we can enhance our institutional identity and gain a competitive position in obtaining adequate funding. However, no amount of media work can compensate for an ill-conceived or mismanaged research program. Sound research must come first!

I recommend that research administrators, scientists and institutional communicators become much more aggressive in making their interpretations of scientific information available to the popular media. Our information should be made available and attractive to the media. We should aggressively address controversial issues, rather than forever react to the issues on a defensive basis.

Occasionally, we are accused of "information management," or telling the story as we think it should be rather than "how it is." As an administrator, I cannot say information management is appropriate; however, I suggest that it is not a good idea to thrust your unprotected hand into the flame unless you want to get burned. Intelligent timing of

Journal of Applied Communications, Vol. 62, Iss. 4 [1979], Art. 3
information release is an essential element of media programming in today's society.

In general, I find that most media representatives will attempt to understand and handle their reporting in a responsible manner if fully informed in an open and honest relationship. We tend to get in trouble when it appears to the media that we are trying to hide or sidestep a situation without giving adequate explanation to our position.

In the final analysis, popular media programs are effective when scientists, communications support staff and administrators work together as a team to determine appropriate communication goals and objectives. The primary function of the administrator in this process is for he or she to assure an organizational climate that encourages and rewards teamwork and intelligent, aggressive use of the popular media.

To me scientists' attitudes about using the media is a major factor in achieving successful media results. A recent survey of 242 agricultural scientists in the 13 states making up the Southern Experiment Station region showed that most of these scientists hold a healthy regard for the popular media as a means for communicating about their research. Studies showed that 46 percent rated mass media as extremely or very important as a means for reporting on their personal research. However, 62 percent reported that they were spending too little time on their popular reporting and 81 percent said that mass media is probably the single most important source of information in which the general public forms an image of agricultural scientists and their research work. Two-thirds agreed that we should be placing more importance on mass media now than 15-20 years ago.

Another study, by Leidner at Iowa State, showed that experiment station directors are not highly involved in the decision making process related to station press releases. In fact, only one third of the 46 directors surveyed indicated any involvement in the initiation of ideas for releases and 28 percent reported approving treatment and content of releases. At the same time, Leidner reported finding a fairly high agreement between editors and directors on audience priorities and communications goals to be achieved with information programs.

A major restraint imposed upon our communications support functions has been the lack of adequate funding to mount extensive mass media support programs. For exam-

ple, only 1 percent of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station budget is allocated for direct media work through the department of agricultural communications. I would expect that portion is fairly typical of most states.

On a more critical note, my concern for research related information programs with the popular media has been the relative lack of evidence of innovation. It seems to me that we have not shown creative use of resources currently assigned as well as might be expected. Perhaps the situation stems both from the lack of top level administrative understanding and leadership in both research and communications for its function. I'm not sure that we -- research administrators and communication administrators and staff -- have really talked through our mutual concerns and aspirations. I view the 1979 National Agricultural Science Information Conference and a similar conference held in 1971 as being very productive in this regard. For example, after the 1971 conference, a number of states recruited some talented writers and assigned them the title of "science writer" or "science editor." Texas was one of these states along with Minnesota, Washington, Oklahoma and Missouri to mention those that I am aware of at this time.

Finally, we need to aggressively pursue activities that will improve our dissemination of science information. One idea is a computer-based news service. Communications staffs at Michigan State and Nebraska have already done some interesting pioneering work in direct computer services to media outlets.

And we may be just months away from satellite communication systems that will be feeding a variety of electronic signals to housetop reception dishes. Are we thinking far enough ahead in building the expertise and contacts to adequately interface with these exciting new communication tools?

I hope that we research administrators provide the quality of leadership that will encourage you to move out and be creative in your approaches. At the same time, we should provide the financial support you need for successful science information communication through the popular media.

