

When the journalist calls

PHOTO: COLOURBOX.COM

Tips and advice
on how to handle
the media





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Why is it important to be in the media?

Good media relations give you and your scientific community the opportunity to share knowledge and information with a wider audience - and reach out to more people.

There is no fixed recipe on how to build good relations with the media. But you should consider the time spent a good investment, which may give you unexpected benefits and valuable contacts for the future. A successful interview and news story may even generate more funding of your research!

As one of the most important sources of knowledge in Norway, the University of Oslo enjoys a high reputation as a trustworthy institution. It is important to maintain and strengthen this trust by communicating actively and openly.



Take the initiative to contact the media!



PHOTO: COLOURBOX.COM

There are many people and institutions fighting for the media's attention. The University's Department of Communications has built good relations with the media and is continuously striving to strengthen them even further. Our aim is to create win-win situations that favour both the interests of the media and the university.

However, it is important that you and your co-workers at UiO also take the initiative to build good relations with journalists. Why? Because if you make the contact and get the media interested in your story, chances are you will have more influence on the communication process.

You may want to seek the help of advisers at the University's Communications Department or at your faculty or institute before approaching the media. They can help you select the best way to communicate your story and reach your target audience.

These may be your options:

- Web article
- Press release to selected media
- Exclusive contact with journalist
- Press conference or seminar
- Feature article or debate article

What makes a story newsworthy?

- It should be relevant here and now
- There should be something controversial or unexpected about it
- The story should concern many people
- It should have some relevance to society
- It should have some emotional appeal
- It should be possible to illustrate

Remember, a big news event at the university – e.g. the publication of an article in an important magazine, a visit from a famous scientist, awards and distinctions – may not be perceived as important or interesting by the journalist or the general public. There has to be some link between your story and the general public. They have to find it important or interesting.



PHOTO: UNICOLA SÆTHER

Paleontologist Jørn Hurum made research on the primate fossil «Ida» into a major news story, attracting media attention from all over the world.



PHOTO: UIO/WGVE VOIGT

The working conditions of the journalist

Journalists have tight deadlines and limited space to fit their story on. Very few of them have science as a special field.

A journalist is not a mouthpiece. The job of the journalist is to ask questions on behalf of the general public and to be critical.

It is wise to help the journalist by giving a short introduction to the subject, explaining the difficult terms and describing the content in a language that the general public can understand.

Instead of being overly critical and patronizing, you should acknowledge the limitations of journalism and focus on how you and the journalist may work together to communicate the matter clearly and accurately.

What the journalist needs

A journalist usually needs:

- Background and facts
- Precise comments
- An understanding of what the news is
- Opposing viewpoints on a controversial issue
- Tips about other people who know more about the case or have a different approach
- Help to understand difficult cases
- An explanation of why this particular case is important

When the journalist comes to see you

Meet the journalist with a friendly attitude. Suggest photographic locations. An office is generally not the best location. A laboratory or some other background setting may be far more illustrative. It is often a good idea to do the interview outdoors, using the Blindern campus as a background setting.

Please refer to the UiO website or other resources where the journalist may find additional press photos or information about the case. You may also have private photos which the journalist can use. If there are other people appearing in these photos, you should seek their consent before publication.



During the interview

If you feel caught off guard when a journalist calls you, you may tell him or her to call you back in half an hour or an hour. This will give you time to prepare the facts and confer with your colleagues.

Try to keep the language as simple and concise as possible. Remember that you are addressing the general public, not the journalist or your colleagues.

Before and after the interview

You may want to read through an article before it is publicised. Make this demand before the interview starts.

You are entitled to edit your own quotes and point out any factual errors in the presentation.

You should not red-pencil the entire article. It is the work of the journalist.

As a general rule, there is no such thing as “off the record”. The journalist may even use statements you make after the interview is over. The only exception is when you have an explicit agreement with the journalist to provide background information and not be cited, in which case the journalist may present “your” information as his own.

In the event of a dispute concerning the rendering of the interview, you should ask the Department of Communications at UiO for assistance. You can also refer to the Code of Ethics for the Norwegian Press (Vær-varsom-plakaten).

Dealing with criticism against UiO

A case involving strong criticism against UiO should not be handled by one person alone. Talk to your superiors and discuss who should handle the media.

These cases will often be dealt with by the university management. However, it is not unusual that they involve people with direct scientific and administrative responsibility. The media will go after these people, and it could be you.

Don't panic! If other people are responsible for handling the media, then refer to them. If, on the other hand, you have been given this responsibility, you may seek help to prepare for the questions asked by the media. How can you answer calmly, yet firmly to these questions?

The university emphasizes transparency in crisis situations. You need not say everything, but everything you say needs to be true.

Successful media handling will depend on your ability to:

- Provide accurate information fast
- Keep the initiative and stay on top of the situation
- Provide additional information to prevent the spreading of false information and rumours
- Stay in close contact with superiors and colleagues

The principle of public access

UiO is a public institution and should therefore comply with the public rules and regulations governing public access to information about its activities. As a general rule, the media should be given access to documents and know what's going on at the university. Only matters that are confidential according to Norwegian laws on privacy and trade secrets are exempt from this rule.

Researchers have the right to withhold their work from public access until the time of publication in a scientific review. This right is defined by the agreements and conditions of employment. Some forms of research will require the approval of the National Committee for Research Ethics.



Nevertheless, researchers may disclose research if it is considered to be of public interest. This does not mean that the matter of public access is left to your own personal discretion. You should study the principle of public access carefully, and any refusal to disclose information should refer to specific paragraphs in the Freedom of Information Act (Offentleglova). If in doubt, you may seek the help of legal experts at the Department of Research Administration.

As a general principle, however, all administration issues concerning research, teaching and other aspects of UiO activity should be open to public access. Openness is the general rule, silence the exception.

Media training and advice

Communications advisers at UiO are prepared to help you with:

- Preparation for interviews, media correspondence or planning of one's own media activities.
- Preparing and distributing press releases, also internationally.
- Advice and media questions in a wider context, especially matters concerning strategic questions and UiO policies.



<http://www.uio.no/english/about/news-and-events/press/index.html>